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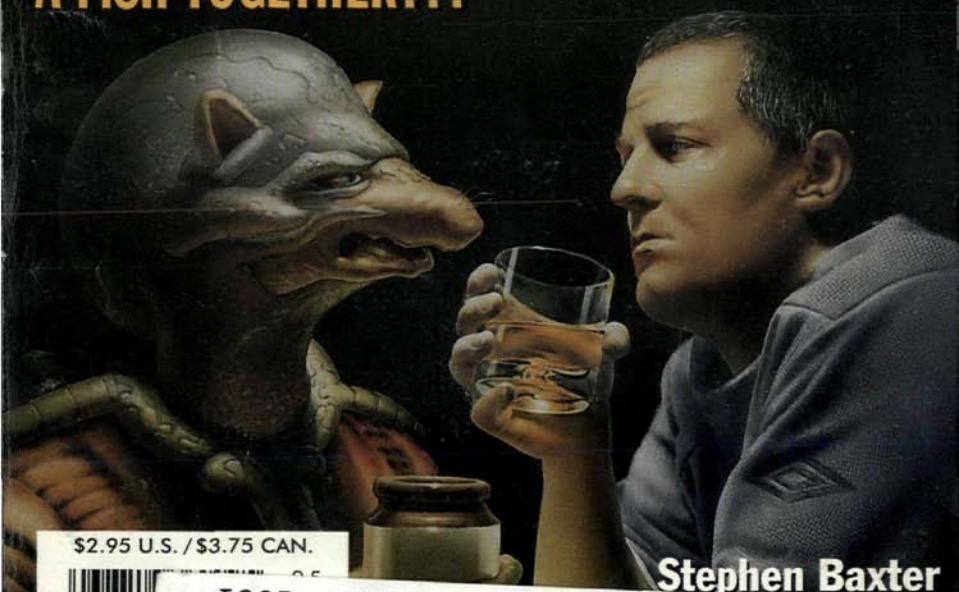

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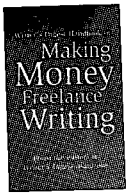

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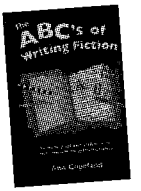

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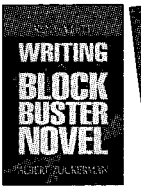

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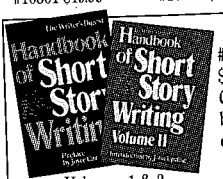

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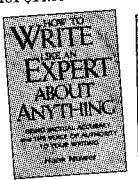

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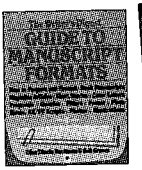

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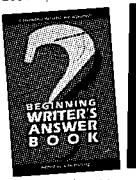

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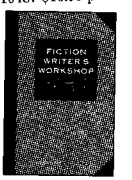

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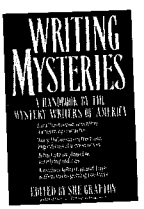

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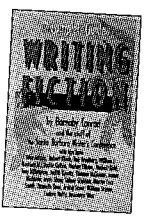

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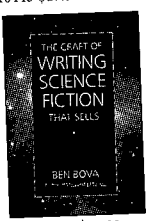

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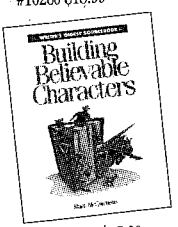

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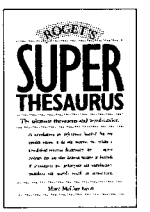

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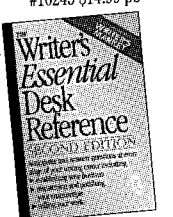

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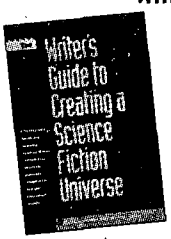

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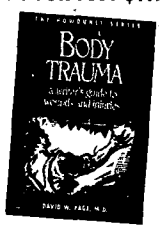

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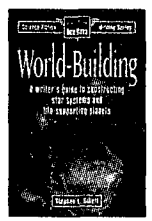

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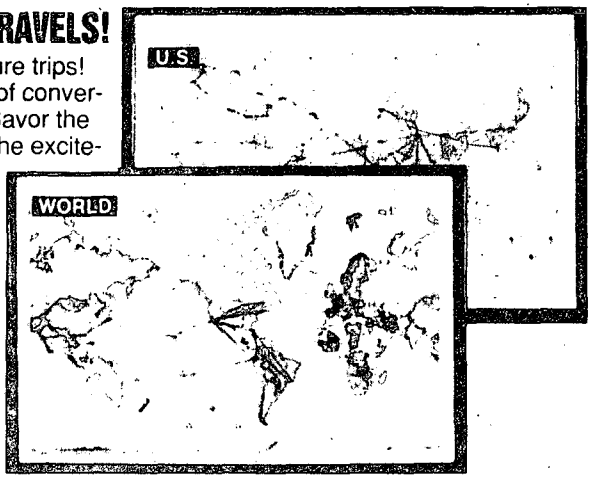

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE HANDPRINTS ON THE WALL

A few months ago I devoted this space to a discussion of the thrilling photograph taken by the Hubble space telescope, showing stars being born in the Eagle Nebula, seven thousand light-years from Earth. I said of it that "it may well be the most extraordinary picture in the entire history of photography," and I've had no reason since then to retract that hyperbolic statement.

But lately I've been looking at another set of photos that excite me nearly as much—for utterly different reasons. The dazzling Hubble picture seemed to me to roll back the barriers of space and time and remind us of the limitless possibilities that the future holds for us. "We are not all that contemptible a species," I said, "if we can manage to poke our little cameras into the cradles of the stars."

What these new photos do for me is to summon up not the great and glorious science fictional future, when starships will go forth to explore far galaxies, but the astonishing and mysterious human *past*—the remote, alien era we call the Paleolithic, when your ancestors and mine walked the Earth, members of a vanished civilization about whose nature we can make only the vaguest guesses, but which may have been far more complex than we think. They're to be found in a book called *Dawn of Art: The Chauvet Cave,* by Jean-Marie Chauvet, Eliette Brunel Deschamps, and Christian Hillaire, published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc. of New York. The book's subtitle says it all: *The Oldest Known Paintings in the World.* It contains ninety-four brilliant color plates that show the astounding masterpieces of art that were discovered in December 1994, on the walls of a cave in the region of southeastern France known as the Ardeche.

Prehistoric cave paintings are nothing new, of course. The first modern discovery of them occurred in 1879. In that year Don Marcelino de Sautuola, a Spanish aristocrat with an interest in geology, went exploring in an underground cave at Altamira, in northern Spain, where he had previously found the bones of such extinct mammals as the giant stag, the European bison, and the wild horse, in association with flints and arrow points of stone and bits of black and red pigment. Don Marcelino's small daughter, who had accompanied him into the cave, wandered off into a side corridor, and came back after a few minutes crying, "*Papá! Mira, Papá! Toros pintados!*" Come look, Papa! Painted bulls!

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The Altamira cave proved to contain spectacular paintings not only of bulls but of a whole horde of animals, thundering across the roof of the cave: bison, a charging boar, a wild horse, a whole zoo of creatures. They were the work of a superb artist who, using pigments made from iron oxide, ocher, and bison blood, had rendered the prehistoric creatures with brilliant three-dimensionality, making cunning use of the bumps and shallows of the cave roof to enhance the realistic effect.

Though the Altamira paintings were regarded at first as a hoax—prehistoric man, it was generally thought then, had been a barbaric creature, hardly more than an ape—it has been recognized for many years that they were in fact the work of an artist or artists of the Paleolithic Magdalenian culture, and have a probable age of around thirteen-to-fourteen thousand years. That is awesome enough, but many far more ancient cave paintings have been discovered in Western Europe since Don Marcelino's day. Beginning in 1894, French cave explorers found hundreds of paintings in the caves of the Perigord district—in one cave alone, representations of eighty bison, forty horses, twenty-three mammoths, seventeen reindeer, eight wild cattle, four antelopes, two woolly rhinoceroses, a bear, a wolf, and a lioness! The cave known as Les Trois Freres in the Pyrenean foothills yielded thousands of paintings and engravings of ancient animals, and also

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the spookiest cave art of all, eerie portraits of human "sorcerers," one wearing antlers and a long pointed mask, another masked as a bison and carrying bison hooves before him. And four teen-aged boys in 1940, chasing a runaway pet dog, stumbled upon the extraordinary cave of Lascaux, sometimes called "the Sistine Chapel of prehistory," with a wondrous array of animal paintings thousands of years older than those previously found: they date back at least seventeen thousand years, according to Carbon-14 analysis, and perhaps more.

The new Chauvet Cave paintings, though, are even older. The preliminary C-14 findings give them an age ranging from 30,340 years to 32,410 years, with a margin of error of about 600 years. These numbers are breathtaking for two reasons. One is the sheer antiquity of the paintings. The Altamira cave paintings, once believed to be the ultimate in prehistoric art, *are closer in time to us* than they are to those of Chauvet. The other, and perhaps more significant thing about the age of the Chauvet paintings, is this: though they are so extremely ancient, they are as sophisticated in technique as any cave paintings of later epochs. We are not looking, that is, at the crude and primitive origins of art here—simple stick-figures and flat cartoon sketches. We are coming in on a tradition already well established, in which the technical representation of three-dimensional reality on two-dimensional surfaces was handled with a skill worthy of artists of any later era. The startling possibility arises that these Paleolithic people occupy a place in the history of human art closer to us in time than it is to the beginning: that the Chauvet people, ancient as they are, were relatively late figures in the development of art, and we may yet make discoveries that push our knowledge of ancient art back in time another fifty or even one hundred thousand years.

Look at Plate 55 in the Abrams book: an elegant frieze in black, three horses, shown in profile, facing each other. Notice the subtle shading of their jaws, the realistic depiction of their manes, the rendering of expression in their eyes and lips. They seem poised in contemplation, readying themselves for motion. Or the two rhinoceroses of Plate 53, massive beasts stubbornly standing nose to nose in blunt confrontation, a scene unique in all of Paleolithic art. We can practically hear their angry snorting. And then there is the solitary rhino of Plate 69, his front horn sweeping upward in an exhilarating, enormously exaggerated line that follows the curve of the wall. No rhino ever had a horn like that one; but the artist surely could not resist the joy of extending that curve to such an astonishing length.

Plate 88 gives us a bison in perspective, the body seen in profile, the massive horned head pivoted around at a 90-degree angle to stare straight out in a full-face view. Plate 82 offers a pride of cave

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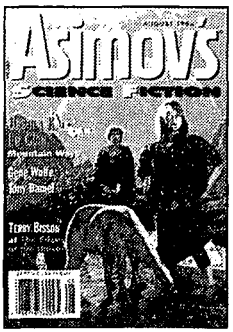

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lions, all of them maneless as these big cats apparently were: eyes alert, ears and noses at work, magnificent predators poised for attack.

All those are color paintings, some in black, some in red. But there are engravings, too, white outlines against the cave wall, done with magnificent fluidity and power. Plate 30, for instance: a pair of mammoths in profile, one standing behind the other, their strange humped heads forward, their massive bodies forever arrested in mid-stride. Even more startling, perhaps: Plate 33, a frontal view of a sitting owl, the only owl portrait in all of prehistoric art, and a masterpiece: quick minimalist strokes, a circle for the head, two upjutting lines for ears, the hunched shoulders and tapering body suggested by rows of parallel vertical lines.

Chauvet Cave was never inhabited. It contains no artifacts, other than the paintings and engravings—no trash, no signs of campfires. Perhaps it was a ritual center of some sort, a speculation that is enhanced, though hardly confirmed, by the strange presence of a bear skull neatly perched atop an altar-like slab of stone that fell long ago from the ceiling. But that is only a conjecture, which may never be confirmed. What we do know is that artists working by flickering torchlight decorated that cave more than thirty thousand years ago, and left, and never returned. Other visitors came four thousand years later—when the caves were already as ancient to

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them as Babylonia and Sumer are to us. We know that much, because those visitors rubbed their torches against the wall to scrape away accretions of charcoal that had built up on them, leaving smudges that can be carbon-dated, and those smudges, though unthinkably old, are forty centuries younger than the carbon in the pigment of the paintings themselves.

There are, all told, close to three hundred figures in Chauvet Cave—rhinos and mammoths and horses and bison and lions and bears, and the extinct cattle known as aurochs, and ibexes and reindeer and even what may be an insect. There are no humans depicted. But the cave walls do contain one poignant reminder of humanity: renderings of unmistakably human hands. Some of these are shown as positive images, where a hand coated with pigment was simply pressed against the wall; some are negative images, the pale outline of a hand with outspread fingers created by holding the hand to the wall and spattering pigment all around it. It is these handprints on the wall that give me the ultimate shiver, for they are, I like to think, the signatures of the artists themselves.

We will never know that, of course. There is much that we will never know about these incredibly ancient paintings and the people who created them. The Chauvet Cave, though, gives us a view through the door of time into the mysteries of almost unthinkable antiquity. We tend too often to think of ancient man as a grunting naked savage living in brutal barbarity, but such masterworks of art as the Chauvet paintings argue otherwise. I think there was much more to these distant ancestors than we have dared to suspect. The language of these people, their epic poems, their myths, the names of their gods—these are lost to us forever. But their marvelous paintings remain. ●

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

How to make your car invisible to radar and laser...*legally!*

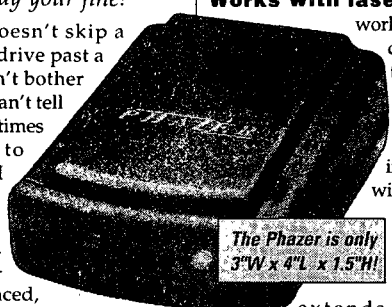
Rocky Mountain Radar introduces a device guaranteed to make your car electronically "invisible" to speed traps—if you get a ticket while using the product, the manufacturer will pay your fine!

■ *The Phazer will "jam" both radar and laser guns, preventing police from measuring your speed.*

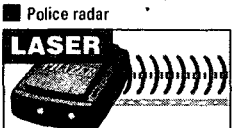
If your heart doesn't skip a beat when you drive past a speed trap, don't bother reading this. I can't tell you how many times it's happened to me, even if I wasn't speeding.

It seems with speed-detection technology getting more advanced, tickets are almost unavoidable. And although devices exist that enable motorists to detect these speed traps, they are outlawed in many states...including mine.

The solution. Today, Rocky Mountain Radar offers a solution—the Phazer. Combining a *passive* radar scrambler with an *active* laser scrambler, it makes your automobile electronically "invisible" to police speed-detecting equipment.



■ Radar with FM "chirp"
■ Police radar



■ Special infrared with "noise"
▩ Police laser

HOW TO MAKE YOUR CAR DISAPPEAR

Radar and laser scramblers are devices that foil speed traps by making vehicles electronically "invisible" to police radar. Radar and laser scramblers mix a portion of the signal with background clutter and reflect it back to the squad car. This technique creates an unreadable signal that confuses the computer inside the radar gun.

How it scrambles radar. Police radar takes five to 10 measurements of a vehicle's speed in about one second. By mixing an X, K or Ka radar signal with an FM "chirp," the Phazer sends one signal that tells the radar the car is going 15 m.p.h. and another signal that the car is going 312 m.p.h. Because police radar can't verify the speed, it displays no speed at all.

■ *The Phazer makes your car invisible to police radar and lasers or the manufacturer will pay your speeding ticket!*

Works with laser, too! The Phazer also works against Lidar that use the change in distance over time to detect a vehicle's speed. The Phazer uses light-emitting diodes (LEDs) to fire invisible infrared pulses through the windshield. This gives a false indication of the car's distance, blocking measurement of your speed. Its range of effectiveness extends from as far as three miles to almost 100 feet away from the trap.

Ticket rebate program. Rocky Mountain Radar is so confident that the Phazer will work that if you do get a speeding ticket within the first year while using the Phazer, they will pay your fine if the speed limit was not exceeded by more than 30%, or 15 miles per hour, whichever is less.

Risk-free. Try the Phazer. It's backed by our risk-free trial and three-year manufacturer's warranty. If you're not satisfied, return it within 90 days for a "No Questions Asked" refund. Best of all, unless you live in Minnesota, Oklahoma or Washington, D.C., using the Phazer is completely within your legal rights.

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Bill Johnson

WE WILL DRINK A FISH TOGETHER . . .

Bill Johnson is a thirty-nine-year-old engineering manager who works on advanced multimedia hardware and software development for Motorola. Originally from South Dakota, he and his wife and two children now live in Illinois. Mr. Johnson is a graduate of Clarion who has sold a number of stories to *Analog*. In his enthralling first tale for *Asimov's*, he vividly re-creates the people and the landscape of his birth state.

Illustration by Anthony Bari

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"I'm sorry to call you at work, Tony," my brother said, "but Sam died about an hour ago."

Sweet Jesus, I thought. *I could never get time to go see him, and now there's no time left. What have I done?*

"Was it easy on him? Did he go quick?" I asked.

Steve shook his head.

"It wasn't good, Tony. They think he fainted or something and fell while he was getting a shirt out of his closet. Probably hit his head against the door frame on his way down. His roommate was out walking with the nurses and nobody noticed Sam was missing. They found him later. He was unconscious and bleeding."

"Damn," I said softly. "Did they take him to the hospital?"

Steve shook his head again. "Doctor was there already at the home for someone else, so they put Sam back in his bed and sewed up his head. Then he started to complain about pain in his gut." He looked down and away from the camera. I heard a high-pitched voice and laughter and the sound of little running feet. Elizabeth, fresh from her second birthday party, crawled up in Steve's lap.

"Hi, hi, hi," she said in a sing-song voice. She reached up and kissed her daddy, her face and fingers still sticky and speckled with pink icing.

"Elizabeth!"

Elizabeth's mother, Rose, appeared briefly on-screen behind her. She grabbed Elizabeth around the middle and swung her up to rest on one hip, then glanced at me and smiled. She handed Steve a brightly colored paper napkin with "Happy Birthday" printed on it in fluorescent pink and blue with the other hand.

"Elizabeth, Daddy's trying to talk with Uncle Tony," she said. She was a short woman, medium build, with strong arms and blonde hair cut in a shag. She turned quickly to face me. "Hello, Tony. I'm sorry to hear about Sam." She turned back to Elizabeth. "Let's go back to the party, honey. It's time to open presents."

"Open presents!" Elizabeth said with enthusiasm. She wiggled off her mother's hip and headed for the kitchen, her mother dragging behind her.

Steve brushed crumbs off his clothes and icing off his face and looked up at me. We both smiled.

"She gets worse after this," I warned. "Two year olds are very busy people."

"Like she isn't already," Steve said ruefully.

"So, what happened?" I asked. "Was it his abdominal aorta again?"

"Probably, but there's no way to tell without an autopsy, and I don't think we need one of those," Steve said. He took a deep breath and looked away from me. He did not look happy. "Tony, he didn't want to go through the hospital routine again. After his last attack he put himself on a DNR."

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DNR. Do Not Resuscitate. A big red flag written in dry medical language. In ordinary English it meant the patient was ready to die, and wanted to go quickly and easily, without massive intervention. I tried to imagine Sam hooked up to monitors and tubes and needles, a thin, frail figure lost among the machines. Sam never lived like that, and it hurt to even imagine him dying that way. DNR was one hell of a better way to go. Especially for Sam.

"Dissected aorta hurts a little bit," I said with careful understatement. Like a red-hot charcoal burning in your stomach, Sam told me after his last stay in the hospital. Like a cramp that never ends, and just gets tighter and tighter until it's a digging rat bite that never goes away.

"They gave him morphine like water," Steve said. "As much as he wanted."

"Did it work?"

"They said it did," Steve said. He sounded doubtful. He was a respiratory therapist at the University of Nebraska Hospitals. He knew all about DNR's and aortas and how hard it was to die. "There's always a first time for something to work."

"When's the funeral?" I asked.

"Bob and I are going up to Dakota tomorrow. We've got to deal with the bankers and the lawyers," Steve said with distaste. "Funeral will be on Saturday."

I thought quickly about work and schedules and how fast I could rearrange my life. Luckily, or unfortunately, I didn't have much of a life to re-arrange. Just this once that was an advantage.

"How about you fly in to Omaha on Thursday and drive up with Rose on Friday morning?" Steve said. "Rose's sister will come to take care of Elizabeth but she can't get free until Thursday night. That will also give us two cars up there."

"However you want to do it, little brother. You're in charge on this one," I said.

"Thanks. I feel so lucky."

"I'm sorry, Steve. It doesn't seem fair. . . ."

"But I'm a lot closer and I'm executor of the estate," Steve finished for me. He hesitated. "Are you sure you can get away? I watch the news. I've seen you in the background around the alien."

I thought about my orders to keep everything confidential, and mentally said *screw it.* Steve wasn't in the media and he knew how to keep his mouth shut.

"Yeah, I'm on security detail for the ambassador."

"Can you get away? I mean, we can handle this if you can't. Everybody will understand."

I stiffened. Something must have shown on my face because Steve winced slightly.

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"This is family business, Steve. I know what I've got to do. I'll be there. You don't have to worry about me."

"We'll see you at the house on Friday, then," Steve said. "Visitation starts at three in Milbank."

I killed the call and leaned back in my chair. The holster around my shoulders tugged at me and I absently took it off and laid it on the desk. I rubbed my shoulders and looked out the window. Spring was well advanced in the District, and the trees were heavy with buds and a few leaves. The cherry trees were in full bloom.

I checked the weather forecast for Dakota. Sleet, mixed with snow. Just about what I expected. It could be a full greenhouse summer everywhere else in the country, and Dakota would get a blizzard.

Enough delay. I took a deep breath and made the call.

"Carole? Tony. I need to take a few personal leave days. . . ."

"No," she said.

Five minutes after I called her, and got my first "No," I was in her office.

"Not a chance. No way. You're in charge of the security detail for the ambassador. You can take time off later, when the negotiations are all over, but not now. I'm sorry," Carole said.

I stared at the wall behind and above her. Everything in her office, from the standard-issue metal desk to her green, plastic-covered swivel chair to the lead-lined anti-surveillance curtains that tightly covered the windows, was standard government issue. The same government that helped get me the hell out of Dakota, that gave me a career, that told me I was important and gave me a job that *was* important. I took a deep breath.

"Then I quit. You'll have my resignation letter in an hour."

"You can't resign!"

"I just did."

Carole stood behind her desk and glared up at me. She was trim and athletic, but she couldn't have weighed more than 130 pounds. She was medium height for a woman, which meant the top of her head came to just below my sternum. In other words, I could have picked her up, tucked her under my arm and carried her around without any trouble.

She scared the hell out of me.

"You'll give up everything to go to a damn funeral?"

"Carole, he raised my Dad. He was the closest thing to a grandfather I had," I pleaded.

"I understand," she said softly. "I really do. I wish you could go. I *want* you to go. But not now. Not after last Monday."

Monday I became a hero, and the memory still hurt. I remembered the sudden feeling I had as I stood next to the ambassador, that it might be better if I moved just half a step to the left. Then the sudden flare of

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pain, and the way I spun and flailed as the bullet meant for the alien slammed into my impact vest.

The ambassador looked down at me, everything seeming to move in slow motion, his face a mask. Then he was buried under a pile of agents as they pushed him to the ground and covered him with their own bodies. The reaction team grabbed the shooter, and interrogation tracked him back to a reactionary group.

It was a simple solution. A crazy with a gun was something everyone could understand. And nobody got hurt except for me, and the vest protected me so that all I got was a huge bruise on my chest. The whole incident flashed on the news for maybe a day, and then was quickly forgotten. Everything was tied up nice and neat.

Too neat.

Where did he get the gun? Where did he get the ID? How did he get so close?

What else was going on here?

The answers were logical and reasonable and too damned easy. Carole and I both suspected something more was involved, but there was no proof. Maybe we were too suspicious, but part of our job was to look for a conspiracy in everything.

Now I just didn't have the time.

"Carole, I've got to bury Sam."

"Your brothers are there, right? They can bury him. You can pay your respects later," she said. She looked away, shook her head, then looked up at me and her face softened. "Tony, he's not going to know you're not there. Life is for the living, and I'm sure he'd want you to do your work first. I'm sure he'd understand."

I thought about Sam.

"First thing you've got to understand is that flatlanders might look like us, might sound like us, might even be related to us, but they don't think like us," Sam said in his cigarette rasp voice. I stood next to him in my footed pajamas, my favorite blanket in one hand, my other hand in his, and remembered how tall he looked as I stared up at him and his whisker-studded face. "Flatlanders measure themselves as individuals, and they use work as the measuring stick. We are different. To us, family *is more important than kin.* Kin *are more important than* line. Line *is more important than any outsider. And* everything *is more important than* work.

No, I did not think Sam would understand.

"Damn it, Carole, I'm the oldest," I said, frustrated. How to explain this to someone from the flats? I tried to make myself calm. "I'm the eldest in the line now. I've got to be there at the funeral."

She looked up at my stubborn face, and tried another tack.

"What if our side needs you in the negotiations? Ambassador Foremost says he owes you a favor. What if we need to use that?"

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I remembered Foremost, when he and Carole came to visit me in the examination room after the attack. I remembered his voice, dry as sandpaper and correct as a computer, his head cocked to the side with a nervous manner that always reminded me of the jerky movements of my pet parakeet. The rest of him, however, looked nothing like a bird. He was stockily built, just a few inches taller than Carole, and broad. Underneath the robes and harness I knew he was all muscle and bone, with a protective exoskeleton over his most vulnerable points. He was an omnivore, and the exobiologists claimed he was descended from cursorial hunters, much like early man. He looked more like a wolverine than an ape, but I liked the way he thought.

And that was part of the problem, when the Trader ship found us. Our races were different enough that communication was difficult, and similar enough that we were potential competitors. Potential for war or peace, trade or conflict. We seemed to be more advanced in some technologies that they wanted, but they never let us forget that they found us, not the other way around. And with a starship in orbit that could reach any place on Earth, they held the high ground.

Our weapons might be better, but we had no way to get them up and on target. Our boosters were too weak, and the Traders routinely destroyed anything that came near their ship and might even remotely be considered a threat to it.

The Traders, on the other hand, could drop asteroids on us from space. But asteroid strikes were not going to help them understand our genetic engineering technology. Or get the humans rumor said they wanted to bring on board to join their crew.

So we exchanged ambassadors, and started to negotiate.

And negotiate.

And negotiate.

"Where you suffer, I suffer," Foremost told me in the hospital. He held my hand and looked closely into my eyes. "In my line, your name is now written."

Carole looked puzzled, but what the ambassador said made perfect sense to me. It did not make me happy, but I understood it. I wondered what obligations went with his line. I thought briefly of rejecting him, but I did not know how he would react. Safer to say yes.

Really? a small voice inside me said. *Are you sure about this?*

I thought carefully.

"I accept," I said. "What I have to tell you, though, is that in my line your name is *not* written."

He hesitated, then bowed his head.

"I understand and accept this. Perhaps one day I will earn the right to write my name in your line."

I relaxed, just a little. One part down. And no threats of war.

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"But I'll make sure you're associated with my line as long as you're here, and my guest," I said.

He looked up, his eyes as black and hard and dead as a shark's. I tried to read his expression in his face, but he was too unfamiliar, too different.

"I accept," he said. He stood and left the hospital room.

I watched him as he left, his robe tight around his body. Now I was part of his line, and he was associated with mine. As long as he was on Earth he could claim protection and assistance from me and mine.

I hoped to hell he did not understand what I had just done for him. And I hoped I never had to find out what he had done for me.

That conversation was a week old, and that week seemed like a century ago. A week ago Sam was alive, and I was free to live any way I wanted, without responsibility. Now I had a different set of problems, and Foremost was not in them. Now my problem was Sam, and all the changes that Sam's death made to my life.

I shook my head to clear it of memories and looked up at Carole.

"It's not that kind of a favor," I said. "Any personal business Foremost and I have is just that, personal business. Nothing I can say or do will have any effect on the negotiations."

"But—"

"No," I said and cut her off. I stood.

"I'm going to the funeral, Carole. You'll have my resignation letter in an hour."

I flew into Omaha the next day.

Rose, with Elizabeth propped on one hip, met me at the airport. When Rose saw me she put Elizabeth down and waved to me. I hurried to them and got a quick hug from Rose and a big, sloppy kiss on the cheek from Elizabeth.

"Would you like to fly, Elizabeth?" I asked.

"No," she said firmly. She hid her face in her mother's skirt, then peeked an eye out at me and smiled.

"Just a little bit?" I coaxed.

"Oh, Tony," Rose said. "Here?"

"Here," I said firmly.

I picked Elizabeth up under her arms and swung her through the air, feet flying wildly, oblivious to the stares of the other passengers, just because I missed her. She laughed and giggled and threw her head back. Rose just smiled and shook her head while Elizabeth's hair swirled and flowed behind her.

"If you're done now," Rose said, when I put Elizabeth back on the ground. Elizabeth tried to walk in a straight line and instead staggered from side to side, like a drunken sailor, dizzy from her flight. She

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laughed and laughed until I scooped her up and put her on my shoulders. She grabbed my ears to use as steering handles.

"I'm ready now," I told Rose.

I liked Omaha and I liked Steve's house. It was a ranch style, built into the side of a hill so the basement was more like a first floor. He lived in a neighborhood on the far west side of Omaha, out where new subdivisions sprouted like wildflowers and cornfields fought a losing battle against construction bulldozers.

Elizabeth took me by the hand and walked me around inside and outside the house to show me her flowers and her toys. Rose walked next to me and worried.

"I saw you get shot on the news," she said, and everything about her changed with those words. Rose my sister-in-law vanished and suddenly she was Rose the nurse and I was a patient. She subtly moved back a step to look at all of me, then stepped in closer to focus on my chest, where the bullet struck. I wondered how she did the transition so quickly. "Are you all right?"

"They checked me out at Walter Reed," I reassured her. "I'm fine."

"And the ambassador?"

"Not a scratch on him."

"You're not there with him now, Tony."

I checked out the tulips that Elizabeth pointed out to me. There were red flowers and white flowers and buds that had not yet opened.

"Security is with him all the time," I said. "I was just one more agent."

Rose walked away from us a few steps. Elizabeth saw a monarch butterfly and raced off to chase it. I saw the butterfly was in no danger, so I went after Rose.

We stood for a moment in the backyard and looked across the fence toward the fields. Next year they might sprout houses, but this year they still followed older rhythms. Furrows, newly plowed and rich with the stubble left over from last year's harvesting, waited for corn planting. The soil was black and ready, thick with the morning dew and last weekend's rain.

"Do you think things always get better, Tony?" she asked.

I did not think she was talking about the cornfield.

"No," I said, after a moment. "Things don't always get better. They may get better or they may get worse, but it's not an always kind of thing. The only thing that is always is change. Sometimes things change on a regular cycle, like the planting and the growing and the harvesting and the fallowing. Sometimes they change on a bigger cycle, and the smaller cycles change with them or are destroyed. Whether it's good or bad depends on where you stand and what you care about."

"I don't like change, Tony," she said. "Everything I love is in those smaller cycles, the regular ones. I don't know anything about the bigger cycles except that they might crush what I love."

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"I know," I said awkwardly.

She turned away from the fields to face me, her arms folded across her chest. She looked down at the ground, then turned her head and looked out across the fields.

"We got rid of the bombs down here. Things finally looked safe for little girls to grow up. Then the Traders arrive," she said bitterly. "I couldn't stand it if anything happened to her."

I hugged her, gently. I wanted to tell her everything was going to be all right, but I kept my mouth shut and watched Elizabeth chase butterflies. Finally, Rose reached up and patted my hand.

"Let's get inside. We've got a long ride tomorrow."

Rose never went to the north with Steve when he went up to Dakota to fish and hunt and visit Sam. Instead she stayed down south, in Nebraska and Iowa, and worked or visited her folks. This time she had to go north.

Margaret, Rose's unmarried sister, came to stay with Elizabeth while we were gone. As far as Elizabeth was concerned, she had two mamas. Margaret loved the idea, and Rose was always more relaxed when Margaret was in charge instead of a daycare center. We settled Elizabeth with Margaret, said all our good-byes, left all the emergency numbers, and drove north.

The interstate highway was on the Iowa side of the Missouri. I drove and Rose navigated as we followed the flat ribbon of gray concrete, two lanes wide in each direction, a man-made river of traffic. The river itself was out of sight on our left most of the time, and the loess hills, huge mounds of windblown dirt, rose up like miniature Rocky Mountains on our right. Gradually the hills arched away to the east and out of sight.

The Missouri curled back into view just as the smell hit us. Rose quickly rolled up the windows as we passed the mountain of manure from the Sioux City stockyards, and the giant billboard that declared: "This golden mountain represents millions to the Siouxland economy—"

North of downtown we passed over massive housing developments that rolled far to the east and west, like grass over a prairie. Neatly edged lawns and streets laid out in geometrically perfect curves and loops and cul-de-sacs spread out around us like some enormous geometrical poster child.

We crossed into South Dakota, over the Big Sioux river, and past the computer factories that hugged the Dakota side of the river. The factories were there because the corporate taxes were lower in Dakota, but the schools and the services and everything else were better in Iowa. So the houses and the people lived south of the Sioux, and the work stayed in Dakota.

Somehow, I was not surprised.

As we headed north, as the trees got fewer and fewer and smaller and

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smaller and more twisted and gnarled by the wind, Rose got quieter and quieter. She was an Iowa farm girl at heart, even if she was an expert transplant nurse, and she knew how a farm ought to be run. Nice and tidy. When she saw the fields had no fences, that the animals basically had nothing to stop them from coming across the roads, she had nothing to say.

The exit off the main road was marked by a stop sign and a small truck stop that had seen better days. It looked lost and forlorn in the icy drizzle and there was no sign of life except for a neon sign that sporadically blinked an advertisement for a cheap, local beer.

We turned right down a small two-lane blacktop road. I pointed across the brown cattails of a marsh to a copse of trees on the horizon.

"Summit," I said.

Summit had a population sign—a small, metal rectangle with the town name and the population—at the turn off the main road. The sign read: 277. Now it was 276. We turned down Main Street, the only paved road in town, turned left at the pool hall, slid down gravel and clay roads for two blocks, then turned left again.

Sam's house was a tiny white two-story A-frame. The green roof was speckled with black rectangles where shingles had blown free. The exterior was leafed metal siding, smeared with rust marks where the builder used cheap, ungalvanized nails. My brothers were inside. We saw their cars parked outside on the lawn, next to the smoking, burning barrels where they were burning trash from Sam's house. The air was thick and humid with freezing rain and smoke.

I pushed open the door to Sam's house and we entered through the mudroom. We opened the door to the kitchen and a wave of heat and dust slapped us in the face. We went inside and the dust started us both coughing. My brother Bob sat in a big, overstuffed chair under a window. The curtain was drawn tight across the window. He looked up at us and smiled through his big, black beard as Rose sneezed.

"Just think of all them skin cells from Sam and Laverne. Thousands and millions and billions of them," Bob said. We coughed and he smiled again. "Wish we could open a window for you, but it's too cold outside."

In DC, in Nebraska, hell, even in the rest of South Dakota, it was spring. Here, 2000 feet above sea level, on the highest spot between the Missouri and the Mississippi rivers, it was still winter.

Outside, we heard a noise:

Whirrrrrr

"Oh, no," Steve said. He stood next to the kitchen counter with a bottle of beer in his hand. "Not him again."

Bob grinned. I closed my eyes and prayed. Around me I felt Dakota settle lightly, the first layer, and grasp me firmly.

Rose stepped next to her husband, a little speck next to a giant. Steve,

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just as tall as me and even bigger, just shook his head and put on a long-suffering expression. Rose watched all three of us and looked puzzled.

Roaaarrrr

"Again," Steve said, resignation thick in his voice.

Bob grinned again, but this time it was strained. I looked around and tried to figure out how I could get out of the house quickly, without my brothers taking vengeance later for leaving them like a coward.

There was only one door out, and it was too late.

Silence.

"What's going on?" Rose asked in a whisper. She looked nervous and pulled a little closer to Steve. I shook my head and Steve squeezed his eyes shut, made a face, and opened them again. Bob slumped deeper in his overstuffed chair.

A perfunctory knock at the door and we heard it swing open and Indian stepped inside. He was medium height, with long, greasy black hair pulled into a tail. His skin was coppery-brown, and his eyes were black and glassy. He wore a green combat jacket, torn and stained with grease, and a pair of jeans.

"How ya doin'?"

"Fine, Indian," Bob said. He gestured vaguely toward the outside, glanced at Rose, and grinned. "Got your town car outside?"

"Yep, yeah, I do," he said, his voice deep and hoarse, chopped off, as if each syllable came from the edge of an axe.

"Not the country car?"

"No, no, that one I'm still workin' on. Yep, yeah, got that by the house up on some blocks," he said. He laughed, a deep, throaty noise.

"Ya know, Sam was a good friend of mine, my buddy. He leave me anything in the will?"

"We don't know," Steve said. He knew. He was executor of the will. But he did not want to talk with Indian. Particularly when Indian was drunk. "You'll have to ask the lawyer."

"Yep, yeah, Sam was my buddy," he said. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. He carefully straightened it out, but it still flopped down, almost broken through halfway down the white paper. He looked around vaguely, saw me, and looked up.

"You are one big bastard, aren't you?"

"Hello, Indian," I said resignedly. He smiled and coughed.

"Mind if I make some fire, mind if I smoke?" he asked. He ignored us, the question just a formality, and lit up. Bob stopped smiling.

"We don't have any ashtrays, Indian," he said sharply. Indian waved his hand through the smoke, and waved off Bob's irritation the same way.

"No problem," he said. He reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out a green cotton work glove, stained black and hard with oil and grease. He

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put it on his left hand and dropped ash into it. "Yep, yeah, Sam was my buddy. He leave me anything in his will?"

Steve looked irritated. Bob closed his eyes. Rose pulled on my sleeve and I leaned down next to her.

"He's wearing nail polish on his fingernails. Pink nail polish. And he's got live .22 shells sewn on the outside of his jacket. Why is he doing that?"

I shrugged and stood straight.

Indian finished his cigarette and put the still-glowing butt into the back pocket of his jeans. He carefully gathered all the ash in his hand into a neat pile, then brushed his hands together and scattered the ash all over the floor.

Bob stood. He was well over six feet and two hundred pounds, and all of it muscle. Steve and I made Bob look short. The three of us formed up next to Indian and made a living wall. Rose huddled behind us.

Indian looked up, his eyes bleary.

"Yep, yeah, Sam was my friend."

"We know, Indian. We know."

He stepped back. We stepped forward. Without any contact we did a slow dance to move him toward the door and out of the house.

"So, you and Teddy Wahford been running any races lately with your town cars?" Bob asked. He tried to keep Indian's mind occupied while we got him out of the house.

"Hell, no. Teddy's golf cart can't keep up with me," Indian said. He laughed. Two more steps closer to the door. "He's too damn slow."

"You take the blade off your town car, Indian?" I asked. Two more steps.

"Yep, yeah, I had to," Indian said. He laughed again, his voice deep and thick with mucus. "Too much rock goin' into windows. Had to take it off."

"You go faster with the blade off?"

"Slower. Don't know why. Maybe I'll put it back if Teddy gets a fresh charge in his cart."

Finally, the door.

"Yep, yeah, Sam was my buddy," Indian said. He looked up at us again. "You think he left me anything in his will?"

"Good-bye, Indian."

He pushed through the door and went outside, back into what was now a mix of freezing rain and snow. Rose watched through the window as Indian got on his town car and pulled the starter cord.

Roaarrr

He drove off down the gravel road.

"That's a riding lawn mower," Rose said flatly. Bob grinned.

"Oh, no. That's Indian's town car."

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Indian slid out of sight around a corner and past a stand of trees. The engine sound dwindled.

The phone rang.

I picked it up, and it was Indian.

"Hey, big bastard, I forgot to tell you something," he said, his voice barely audible above the roar of his engine and the crackle of cellular phone static. "There's something asking for you in the pool hall."

"Something. What's something?"

"Damned if I know what it is. But it's not part of any Summit line and the boys and girls got a little liquor in 'em. Whatever that thing is, if you want it to stay in one piece, you might want to get on down there."

"Jesus, Indian, thanks for telling me right away," I said sarcastically. Now I was angry. "We don't need any trouble with someone from the flats who got up here by accident. You get yourself in there and tell everyone to calm down. I'm coming straight down."

"What if the stranger isn't from our line?"

"Then tell everyone that as far as I'm concerned, that stranger is associated until I get down there. And if the stranger gets hurt before I get there, then someone else is going to get hurt after I get there. Got it?"

"Done," he said. "Don't take long."

The phone went dead.

Sam's Pool Hall faced on Main Street, directly across from the bank, in what I always thought of as some kind of weird commentary on the divine and profane of commerce. A blue and red neon Hamm's sign flashed in the window. I stepped up onto the landing, gave my boots a quick pass on the metal edge of the mudscraper to knock off the worst of the mud, and opened the door.

Memories hit me like a sledgehammer.

Along the right wall were a dozen heavy oak chairs with high backs and broad armrests, like a king's throne. The wood was dark, almost black, and worn to fit by fifty years of use. The chairs were chained firmly together and then bolted to the wall so no one could take them down and use them in a fight. They smelled of stale beer and moonshine and furniture polish.

Pink sawdust was scattered across the floor and piled up a couple of inches deep against the feet of the two pool tables that dominated the center of the room. There they squatted, the leather cups worn and cracked, the green felt tight and shiny, one in line behind the other down the middle of the room. A single lamp with cheap imitation Tiffany glass and a huge light bulb hung over each table. Wire, with scoring disks strung along it like beads on a necklace, stretched taut high in the air above and across each table. The only way to move the disks was to reach up and push them with a pool cue.

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The rack with the pool cues and the stretcher and the spare set of balls was tucked behind the bar, out of reach of anyone in search of a quick weapon to settle an argument. The bar was Sam's pride and joy.

It was thirty straight feet of dark wood that looked like it was carved out of a single tree trunk. A brass step rod, always polished until it shone, ran along the bottom of the bar. A wall-length mirror, the bottom obscured by rows of half-full liquor bottles, covered the left wall itself.

Chuck stood behind the bar. He'd worked for Sam as a bartender as far back as I could remember, and he never seemed to get any older. Now he held a skullknocker club as shiny and polished as his bald head, and faced the rear of the pool hall with a bored look on his face. When the door opened and I came in he glanced at me briefly, and then pointed with his chin toward the rear of the pool hall.

Indian was in the back at a table, a long-neck beer in his hand and a smile on his face. When he saw me he wiped the smile off and tried to look serious.

Foremost faced three drunks, two men and a woman. He was in a low crouch, his cowl pushed back, his snout forward, his hands relaxed and up. As I watched him I saw his claws flicker in and out.

The drunk woman held a knife, some kind of a slip blade, in her right hand. As I watched she pulled a feint, flipped the knife into her left hand, and slashed. Foremost caught the blade in his robe, whipped it away almost contemptuously, and struck her quickly on the shoulder.

She spun around, staggered, and kept her footing. She got a stubborn look on her face, glanced around quickly, and started for Indian's bottle. He got a protective look on his face and began to push his chair back, away from her.

"No way, Dove," he said. He held the bottle away from her. "No breaking bottles in the pool hall. You know Sam's rules. You can't use this anyway. I'm not done with it. No way—"

"What the hell is going on here?" I shouted in my best parade sergeant voice.

Everyone froze.

I reached over the bar, took Chuck's club, and tapped it lightly in my hand as I walked to the end of the bar. Indian quickly stood and arranged himself behind me.

Dove and the two other drunks looked up at me and said nothing. Foremost straightened out of his crouch and stood silently.

"Chuck!" I shouted, my eyes locked on Dove's. "Give my friends here a beer."

Three beers later I had Dove and her friends sitting down at a table. Another round later, including one for Indian and one for me, and a crème de menthe for Foremost, and we were all best friends.

"Hell, we never knew he was with you, Tony," Dove said. She spilled

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alf the beer down her throat and half down her chin. She wiped her lips ith her sleeve. I motioned to Chuck to bring her another beer. "We just hought he didn't look like he was part of a line. We thought we'd have a ttle fun with him."

"Well, you were right," I told Dove soothingly. "It's important to watch or things like that, just in case flatlanders show up. And he's not part of ny line. But he's associated."

"If he's associated, that's all right," Dove said, her head bobbing. "If he's ood enough for you, he's good enough for us."

"Now, I appreciate that, Dove. I'm touched. Really touched. So I'm go- ng to tell Chuck to keep bringing you beer," I said. I stood, and motioned Indian and Foremost to stand also. "Just for tonight, mind you. But all you can drink tonight."

We moved to the little office in the back of the bar to the accompaniment of cheers from Dove and her friends. Once inside I dropped into the green, fake leather chair behind the desk. Foremost took the guest chair, a high-backed wood job with a dirty white padded seat, and Indian stood.

"Indian, get the word out that Foremost here," I motioned to the alien, "is associated. I don't want any more accidents with people like Dove. Once is an accident and I can understand that. Twice is deliberate and I'll consider that an attack on the line. Understand?"

"Got it, Tony. I'll get the word out. He's associated and you want him left alone," Indian said. I nodded.

"And I want him protected while he's here," I said. "I want you to do that job yourself."

Indian looked down at his half-empty beer bottle. Something almost like shame seemed to flicker across his face.

"Maybe I'm not the best one for that, Tony. I'm not sure I'm everything I used to be," he said slowly.

"I'm not asking you, Indian. I'm telling you. You need some food and some sleep. Get a Polish and some decaf from Chuck to take home. You look like hell."

He opened the door to leave.

I hesitated.

"You did good tonight, Indian. Just like the old days."

"Yeah?" he asked, and his face brightened.

"Yeah."

He shut the door behind him, and carried his new smile with him. I turned back to Foremost.

"Jesus, you're one hell of a lot of trouble."

"It's good to see you again also," Foremost said, his voice deep and ragged.

I sighed and shook my head.

"What are you doing here, Ambassador?"

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"I've come here for protection. Someone has tried to kill me."

I almost laughed at that, thinking about Dove, then realized he was serious.

"Ambassador—"

"Foremost," he said. "Call me Foremost."

"Foremost," I continued, after a pause. "We caught the shooter from the capital and rolled up his network. Right now that's probably the safest—"

"You don't understand," he interrupted. "I'm not talking about the attempt on Earth. Someone tried to kill me on the ship."

The ship was a huge cylinder, bigger than Ceres, and massed less than if it was made out of water. This told us it was hollow. How many billions lived inside? No one knew. No human had ever been aboard.

All I knew was that it covered too many stars in the night sky and scared the hell out of me.

"After the last negotiation session in New York I went back to the ship," Foremost said. He drank from a fresh crème de menthe I got him at the bar while I nursed a Scotch.

"The life-support system on my skimmer failed as I came out of the atmosphere into space. I tried to call for help, but my communications system was also broken. The temperature in the skimmer began to rise rapidly, and without life support I had no way to get rid of the heat," he said. He sipped at his drink. "Neither of these accidents has ever happened in my memory. And I am old enough to remember the last time the ship found an intelligent race that lived on a planet. Now, suddenly, both of these systems fail? At the same time? Against my particular skimmer? At just the worst possible moment? I believe the universe is perverse and all luck is bad. But in this case, even I doubt chaos and suspect causality."

"You're still alive," I pointed out.

"I ejected. A secret precaution I put in place before the negotiations began."

"Just in case we weren't friendly," I said grimly.

"I am old," Foremost said. "Much, much older than you. I didn't get that way by accident."

The windows in the office rattled in the wind and I glanced outside. The rain and ice had stopped falling, and the temperature seemed to be at least a few degrees above freezing. The clouds were still there, low and gray, but they were lighter now, thinner.

Somewhere above them, the sun waited.

"Why are you here?"

"Before I left for the ship I asked about you, and was told about your resignation. Agent Carole also told me where the funeral would occur so I

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could send an appropriate memorial. I had the location with me and I coded it into my lifeboat. The computer did the rest."

I shook my head.

"No, Foremost. I don't want to know how you got here. I want to know *why* you got here," I said. "Carole would throw a security blanket over you like you never dreamed of, if you just ask her. Me? I can't even keep you out of a knife fight in a bar."

He finished his drink and put it aside.

"After the shooting I declared you part of my line. You accepted that, and carefully told me I was *not* part of *your* line, but that as long as I was here, I was associated with your line and under your protection," he said. He spread his arms wide. "Where else would I be safer than with you?"

Damn all lines, I thought. *Damn all governments.*

And damn my big mouth.

"Why would someone from the ship want to kill you?" I asked.

Foremost stood and walked to the window. The building next door to the pool hall was a feed store, and Claire bred bulldogs in a run behind her place.

When we were kids we played with the animals and helped clean them and their run. They were big, stupid, friendly dogs, with oversized paws and ears and the ugliest faces we ever saw. They climbed on us and pulled our clothes for attention and generally proved out the stereotype of the bulldog puppy.

Claire paid us in quarters, but we loved the dogs and we worked for candy when she was low on cash. Once, Steve and a runt got to be special friends. The two of them were constantly with each other, even to the point where he sneaked the dog out of the run when Claire was not looking.

Then one day Steve came to see his friend and he was gone. Sold. Claire tried to explain that she was sorry, it was a business to her, but he never understood. Finally she gave him extra candy and quarters and he ran all the way home, his face streaked with tears.

He gave everything to Bob and me, and never went back to Claire's again.

"Mine is not the only race on the ship," Foremost said. "And mine is not the only line in my race.

"Every time we find a new planet with something we want, some groups on board the ship prosper, and others lose. Overall, the ship gains. But that doesn't make it any easier for the groups that lose."

"This time the potential gains are bigger than usual," I guessed. "So the losses will also be bigger than usual."

"You understand," Foremost said.

"So what are you going to do?"

He stood back from the window, which made the bodyguard part of me relax, and went back to his chair.

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"I have a new proposal from your people," he said. "And I have a funeral to go to. I will think about one, and attend the other."

"I'll call Carole," I said automatically. Then I stopped.

"Who knows you're here?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "No one, yet. By now my people will have found the empty skimmer and the message with my suspicions I left behind. The search will be on for me or my body."

I finished the Scotch.

"I have to bury Sam," I said, stubbornly. "If I call Carole we'll have flatlanders on us like a blanket."

"Ship people as well," Foremost added. "Both my friends, and those who tried to kill me."

The windows rattled to a fresh gust of wind and I heard the scattered pebble sound of freezing rain against the glass.

"Did you bring any funeral clothes?"

When we were young, before Steve was born, my family lived in Sam's house. Downstairs was the kitchen, the bathroom, the living room, and Sam and Laverne's bedroom. Upstairs were two tiny bedrooms.

I remembered the stairs as tall and hard to climb and for once a childhood memory was accurate. The stairs were steep, almost like a ladder, but Foremost scrambled up them quickly. I moved more slowly, my head down so I did not hit it on the doorways or the ceiling.

Foremost used the bedroom on the right. The bedroom on the left was completely filled with a huge, silvery, outdoor TV antenna. Foremost paused and looked at it.

"Communications?"

"Entertainment," I said. "Reception only."

"Wouldn't it work better on top of the house?" Foremost asked.

"Sam liked it right here where he could touch it," I said.

Steve and Rose slept in the downstairs bedroom. Bob camped out in the kitchen. Foremost used the upstairs and I was down on the couch in the living room.

The next morning we were up and moving at dawn. Steve made everyone a breakfast of scrambled eggs with American cheese, thick bacon, and bagels. Foremost discreetly tested everything for allergens, then took a dry bagel to eat with his field rations.

Bob finished his plate, pushed it back, and glanced at Foremost.

"So what do we do today?" he asked.

I finished my orange juice and put my plate by the sink. Steve got himself seconds from the skillet while Rose nursed a cup of coffee.

"Today we bury Sam," I said.

"We know that," Bob said impatiently. "Are you going to go get the Estep token?"

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"I don't have much choice, do I?" I asked. Bob shrugged and looked at Foremost again.

"Always got choices. Might not like them, but always got choices," Bob said. "Token should be at the burial. Token always watches the Eldest get buried before it gets passed on to the new Eldest."

"We'll go to Oly's house and pick it up," I decided. "If someone does come looking for the Ambassador, they'll come here first. We might as well be somewhere else."

Bob grinned.

"What will Oly think about your friend?"

Steve snorted.

"Oly probably won't notice anything different from normal when you two show up," he said, disgusted.

"Oly's not so bad," I said, defensively.

Bob and Steve both stared at me, then smiled. Bob pushed away from the table and stood.

"We'll get everything ready at this end. Be at the cemetery a few minutes early," Bob said. I nodded and motioned for Foremost to follow me. As we got to the mudroom Bob tapped me on the shoulder.

"Steve and I'll talk to the boys and girls," he said in a low voice. "We'll have eyes out to see if any strangers are in town."

"The cemetery is an awfully lonely place. Lots of open country, except on the side with the woods," I said.

"Easy to hide in them woods," Bob agreed. "Or on a hilltop in the corn stubble."

"You'll take care of it?"

"Done."

Foremost and I took the car that Rose and I used to drive up to Summit. It was another dark, rainy day, perfect for a funeral, and I still dialed down the tint on the windows to make it even harder for someone outside to see inside.

We turned right on the road, then left. We drove silently in the barren hills south of town, past fields used only as pasture, that grew only a bumper crop of rock.

The rock reminded me of Washington. I remembered a party in Georgetown, at one of the ever-so-discreet townhouses near the university. In the back, behind all the security doors and the antique furniture and more pretentious people than I could suddenly stand, was a tiny courtyard. I fled there with my Scotch to escape a too-aggressive bureaucrat's daughter.

There I found the rock.

Nothing special, just a small gray boulder about twice the size of a basketball, flecked with black and silver. It was tucked next to a dwarf willow beside a pool. Spray from a small waterfall moistened the rock, al-

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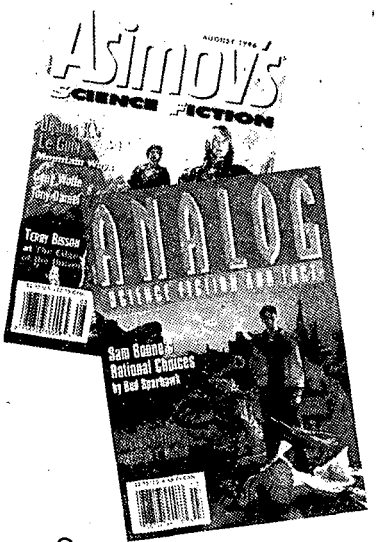

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ready tumbled and smoothed by the glacier that created it. I ran my hands over it and suddenly realized I was homesick.

Now we drove past uncounted fortunes of that kind of decorative rock, poking out of the fields, plowed into piles, pushed into heaps to get them out of the way. I glanced at everything around me, at the rain and the wetlands and the bare hills and the rock and smiled. This was where that rock belonged, not in some little decorative garden, and maybe it was not the only thing that belonged here.

We crossed a ridgeline and stopped on top. I put the car in park, and started to get out of it. Foremost began to get out also. I reached over and touched him.

"You stay inside," I said. "This will only take a minute."

I stood on the ridge, silhouetted against the gray sky, for several minutes. Summit Lake used to be a field like any of a thousand fields in the old tribal lands. One day, as Sam told me, some fool woke up and thought he was in Iowa, not Dakota, and decided to try to plow good buffalo land. Instead of a neat, clean furrow through dirt he hit a rock. When he pulled the boulder off he found it was a caprock, over a spring.

Now Summit Lake filled the entire bowl, probably three or four square miles in area, with only a few scraggly trees to break the rolling, grass-covered hills. And it showed on no maps, not county or state or federal. You knew where it was, and you found it, or you were a flatlander and then what the hell were you doing here anyway?

Satisfied that Oly had plenty of time to see who it was, I got back in the car and headed off down the track to his shack next to the concrete boat landing.

Oly was outside on a bench tucked next to his house. He looked up when the car stopped, a knife and a piece of wood in his hands.

"He is a sculptor?" Foremost asked. I shook my head and pointed to the pile of wood shavings on the ground around Oly.

"He just likes to cut wood. He takes a big piece and makes it into a lot of little pieces. Then he starts over again with another big piece."

"Why?" Foremost asked.

I took a deep breath. I was impatient to get this over, and unhappy about any time we spent out in the open where more people could see Foremost.

"Oly used to be the best carver in this part of the state," I said. "I swear, magic used to flow out of his knife. Now he's got some bad arthritis and his fingers don't work so well. The magic still flows in him, but only in his mind. So he cuts the wood to remember, and he still sees the final carvings in his mind."

"And the rest of us only see the shavings," Foremost said.

"That's our problem, not his," I said briskly. "Maybe we just don't know how to look right. Anyway, let's go. We don't have that much time."

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We got out of the car and walked over to Oly. He looked at me, then Foremost, then back to me. Then back to his wood.

The bench was an old driftwood tree trunk, gray and worn and twisted, roughly knocked with an axe into a flat surface. Oly propped the wood up on two old black plastic bait buckets to get it off the ground.

I sat on one side of Oly, and motioned Foremost to sit on the other side. We sat silently for a moment and stared out at the dark water.

Summit Lake was like a map if you knew how to read it. Small sloped waves, deceptively soft, in the middle where the water was deepest. Taller, thinner waves, with white froth tops and green water, almost as transparent as glass, near the shore and the underwater slope.

The fish that lived in the lake preferred different kinds of water and cover. A good fisherman could look at the lake, at the waves and color, and draw a mental map of what the bottom looked like. A good fisherman knew that walleye liked this kind of water; northern pike liked that kind. Bullhead swarmed over the points, and bass liked the sections where the branches of dead trees, flooded out years ago, poked through the surface.

Sam claimed the world was like a lake, and the people in it like fish. Most people went through their lives without much understanding of what was really going on. Only a few people could stand outside the world and actually see it and make sense out of it. He claimed Oly was one of the best of these.

Tradition said I had to talk first when I met Oly.

"So how's the fishing been, Oly?"

He took a cut with his knife, and a curl of wood peeled onto the ground.

"Been worse. Been better," he said.

"Yeah," I said. "I can see that."

"You came back for Sam," Oly said. Another curl of wood joined the pile on the ground. "Some people said you wouldn't come back. Some people said you were gone from the line, said you didn't even want to be associated anymore."

"They can say it," I said. "People can say anything they want. But I'm back."

Oly was older than Sam, so old that even his grandchildren were older than the brothers and I. His teeth were blackened and mostly missing, his hair thin and the leathery scalp covered with brown age spots.

But his eyes were sharp and it was said that nothing happened in Summit he did not know.

"You brought a flatlander to the funeral," Oly said.

"Steve's wife, Rose," I said. "He's got a little girl now."

"Steve's got a baby," Oly said. He shook his head. "He was such a funny-looking little guy. Looked just like a duck. And now he's got a baby of his own. Funny."

I tried to imagine Steve, closer to seven foot than six, strong enough to

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break ribs as part of his job as a respiratory therapist, as a baby who looked like a duck. I smiled to myself.

"This is Foremost," I said. "He's from upstairs."

Oly nodded.

"Word came around," he said. "He's associated?"

"I gave him my word."

"With Sam gone, you can do that," Oly said. He looked up at me. "I heard how you handled Dove last night."

"Dove and the boys were just having some fun," I said, uneasily.

"You did it right," Oly reassured me.

He took a final cut at the wood, looked at it critically, then folded the clasp knife and put it in his pocket. He stood and turned to Foremost.

"You come with a good recommendation," he said, and jerked his head back over his shoulder toward me.

"I try to do my best," Foremost said.

"He's good people," Oly said. He stared hard at Foremost. "Don't mess him up."

Oly turned and walked with a firm, clean step to his shack. Foremost and I stood and waited.

Oly was back in a minute. In one hand he carried a bundle about a foot long, wrapped in an oilcloth and tied with a piece of rawhide. In the other hand he carried a mason jar. He handed the package to me, and unscrewed the jar with the other.

"Limbo came by this morning," Oly told me. "Said he found some tracks that he'd never seen before around his place. They looked like boot tracks, but not any kind of boot he's ever seen."

We all looked down at Foremost's feet. His boots were as wide as they were long, with three large bulges where a human had toes. There was no way to ever confuse his feet with one of ours.

"He found the tracks all around some kind of metal torpedo that someone had hidden in the brush," Oly said. "Limbo said there was writing on the outside of the metal, but he couldn't read any of it."

"I hid my escape pod after I landed. I hope I did not hurt anything on his farm," Foremost said.

"And then you just walked west into town?" I asked.

"South," he corrected me. "My garment has some camouflage capabilities, and my people are quite good at moving without being seen."

Oly looked at me and smiled, a thin slash across his face. Limbo's farm was east of town. So either Foremost lied when he said he walked south into Summit, or someone else was now prowling around town. The lie was too easy to check, if we looked in the brush north of town for another ship, so I had to assume we had another visitor.

"Sounds like we need a drink," Oly said. He reached in the jar, fished around with his fingers, and pulled out the complete skeleton of a fish,

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head and all. He tossed this on the ground, then tipped the jar to his lips and took a deep drink, so that his Adam's apple moved up and down like a piston. He wiped his lips and handed the jar to me.

The jar was old, tired glass, heavily decorated with curlicues and fancy writing. Inside I saw clear liquid on top and, on the bottom, a white sludge of particles that danced and flickered with oily, reflected light. The smell, a mixture of fish, spices, pickle juice, and pure alcohol, was enough to make my eyes water.

I took a small sip.

The sludge was smooth and silky, with a hint of cinnamon and bay on top of the full, fish taste. Northern pike, I guessed. Then the vinegar cut through and seemed to slice my mouth open. Finally, the alcohol seemed to lift off the top of my head and let the cool breeze swirl around inside.

I handed the jar to Oly. He handed it to Foremost. He looked at the jar, puzzled, and touched it with his allergen analyzer. He stared hard at the display, as if he couldn't believe the results, then tucked the analyzer away. He held the jar in his long, leathery fingers and took a hesitant sip. He closed his eyes while Oly smiled at him. He opened his eyes and handed the jar to Oly.

"Good," he said, his voice raspy and hoarse. "Very good indeed. This is how you preserve the fish you catch?"

"Oly doesn't fish," I corrected. "People bring him fish they catch and don't want." I turned to Oly. "Who's got the still now? I don't recognize the taste of the moonshine."

"You asking as a government man, or as one of us?" Oly said.

"I'm asking as me," I answered. "Government man resigned his job to come to the funeral."

Oly nodded and looked approving. Not many people around Summit had much love for the government. I lost a lot of respect when I went to Washington. The first time I got shot I gained most of it back, but it was an expensive way to put credit in that account.

"That batch of 'shine is from Flipper's new still," Oly said. He looked at the jar critically. "I canned that jar a couple of years ago. Just took it out to see how it's aging."

"Not bad," I said.

"But not quite ripe yet, either," Oly grumbled. "That boy keeps doing fancy things to the old recipe for grain. He just can't leave well enough alone. Makes it hard to can a decent fish when you don't know what the 'shine is going to taste like. These things have to match up just right."

"Sometimes change is good," I said.

"Don't you start up on me," Oly warned. "Change happens fast enough without rushing it."

"What about Sam?" Foremost asked. "Did he fish?"

"Sam? Oh, he put his lines out for all sorts of things. Yes, he was a

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great fisherman. He caught fish all the time, but he never wanted to eat them. He just liked catching them, and making them do what he wanted," Oly said, and grinned. "Kind of like what he did with people. He had his lines out for them, just like he did for fish. Never sure what he was going to catch, but always interested. Me, I'm different. I don't like catching the fish, but I like to take care of them afterward. Same with people. Sam and me, we were like both sides of the mirror, the face that looks in and the face that looks back."

The world is like the lake, and Sam and Oly sit on the shore, and talk and laugh and watch the water . . .

"I put a fish in a jar, add 'shine, spices, and just a little pickle juice. Then I let it rest for a few years. Makes it easier for me to eat with my gums," Oly said, and smiled to expose his lack of teeth again.

"There are people on the ship who would pay you much for that single jar," Foremost said.

"I'm always willing to talk about money," Oly said. He handed the jar back to Foremost. "Have another sip and let's talk."

I left them alone for the moment and took the oilcloth package back to the car. Once there, I gently untied the rawhide and unfolded the material.

The Estep token was two pieces of bone, speckled black with age. They looked like the thighbones of some animal, bigger than a rabbit, smaller than a deer, but nothing I immediately recognized. I touched the bones, ran my finger up and down them, felt the smooth surface with its little pits and whorls, then tied the bundle together again and placed it carefully in the back seat.

Sam never talked much about the token of our line, just enough to let me know it was important. Once a year, at Orville Knob's Nut Fest, the big party just before New Year's Eve, the token was carefully laid out on a table set with a brilliant white tablecloth. The table was always tucked into a far corner of the room, unobtrusive but visible. I sat next to Sam all night one year, and brought him food and beer and listened and watched.

I saw members of the line sidle up to the table and look down at the token. Sam waited a moment, then leaned forward and spoke a few quiet words with the person. They would listen and nod and smile, or speak quietly about some problem they couldn't solve. Then they put a few dollars on the table next to the token and walked away. When they left, I took the money and put it into the strongbox under Sam's chair.

I knew that in the next few days Sam would work on the person's problem. It might get solved, and it might not. Nothing was perfect, not even the token, but as a symbol it was damned powerful to us. To everyone else, it was just a couple of old bones.

I knew what I needed to do next, and wished I could drink more fish

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with Oly to give me some liquid courage. Finally I promised to do myself a favor in the future and picked up my satellite phone and called Carole.

Her personal secretary was an old friend and always answered the private number herself, instead of letting the voice mail do a screening, so I called that number. It rang twice and Phyllis picked up.

"Protective service."

"Morning, Phyllis. It's me."

"Tony!" she said warmly. "Oh, it's good to hear you. I miss you already."

"Phyllis, you're a better liar than anyone else in the office," I said fondly. "I've only been gone two days."

"Two long days. Two extremely long days."

"I turned in my resignation, Phyllis. I'm not coming back. Better get used to it."

"Herself needs you back, Tony. Things aren't going so well right now."

"I know," I said. "More than you think. Is she in?"

"Hold two."

I glanced back at the porch. Three open mason jars rested on the ground and Oly held another in his hand while Foremost tested it with his sampler.

"Tony? Where are you? All hell's broken loose back here," Carole said. Her voice sounded cool, efficient, and just a little desperate.

"I'm still in Dakota. The funeral is this afternoon."

"We got problems, Tony," Carole said. "An alien we've never seen before, from a *species* we've never met before, is down here with the President."

I nodded to myself.

"I'll bet this one doesn't talk like an ambassador," I said.

There was silence from the other end of the line.

"No. Not like an ambassador. More like a general than an ambassador. She says Foremost is gone, they think we have him, and they want him back. They're making demands and giving us veiled threats. No one is talking trade anymore. We have to find Foremost."

"I know where he is," I said.

"Where?"

"About fifty yards away from me, drinking with an old friend of mine," I said.

"Talk to me, Tony. Tell me what's going on," Carole said.

I explained the situation quickly, as if I was doing a debrief on a routine assignment. When I finished, all I heard was her soft breathing on the phone.

I looked over at Oly and Foremost. They each took a jar in hand and sipped. Then they put them down, argued, and picked up another jar, and sipped. It looked like the Dakota version of a wine tasting.

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"I want you to keep him there, safe, until I arrive. I'll grab a jet at Andrews and get there in a couple of hours."

I started to laugh.

"What's so damn funny?" she snapped.

"Where are you going to fly into? Fargo? Sioux Falls? Minneapolis? Those are the nearest cities with an airport big enough to take even the smallest kind of jet."

"Then that's where I'll fly."

"And then you drive," I said, my voice suddenly serious. "You drive for hours. And then you arrive here, with a column of cars and trucks and God knows what else."

"You have a problem with this?"

"We don't take to outsiders up here, Carole. We call them flatlanders, people from outside the hills. You arrive here like that, without any kind of an invitation, like an invading force, and someone is going to have a few drinks, and then take a few shots. Maybe at you. Maybe at Foremost for bringing in outsiders."

"No one would dare," she said, uncertain.

I sighed.

"Carole, there's a town up here where a man was shot down in broad daylight on Main Street with about a hundred witnesses around. No one liked the guy much and his death ended a feud between two lines. Everyone was pretty much satisfied with the result. Then a dozen marshals showed up to enforce flatlander law. If they were to arrest someone, anyone, it stood a very good chance of starting everything up again between the two lines," I said.

"So what happened? What did the marshals find out?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. "Absolutely nothing. Because no one saw a thing, and no one ever said a thing. In broad daylight, in the middle of town. Everyone kept their mouth shut."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"We take care of our own up here, Carole. Let us take care of things our way."

"Foremost isn't one of you."

"He is right now. He's associated, that means under the protection, of the biggest line in the county. He's fine," I said.

"Whose line is that?"

"Mine."

I glanced back to the shack. Oly and Foremost sat close together on the bench. Foremost watched intently while Oly drew in the dirt with a stick. Occasionally they stopped and sipped more fish.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"I want you to be careful. I want you up here, but I want you up here alone. We don't want the wrong people to follow you. Assume someone

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has a trace on you. Get rid of it. Then come up here, alone. Bring whatever communications equipment you want. I'll keep Foremost safe until you arrive."

"And then?"

"And then the three of us will get together and figure out what to do."

"What about the tracks? What if someone from the ship is coming after Foremost?" she asked.

"If there's any trouble, we'll deal with it in our own way."

More silence, until it dragged on like one of those bargaining tricks they taught me in hostage negotiation school. The idea there was to let the silence drag on, let the person who is most anxious talk first.

But this was not some damn role-play game.

"I don't like it, Tony. But I don't have much choice. We'll do it your way."

"Good," I said, and let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. "Put me back to Phyllis. I'll give her directions on how to get you here and where to meet me."

"All right. Give me a minute to tell her what I need and then I'll put her on."

The phone clicked once, I heard dead air, then the phone clicked again and Phyllis came on the line.

"So how do I get her to you?" Phyllis asked.

I briefly gave directions. Phyllis repeated them back to me to make sure she had them down correctly.

"Tony, she'll never say this, so I'll say it for her," Phyllis said. "Thank you. Thank you for everything."

"She never would say it, would she?"

"Tony, she might not say it, but she doesn't want you to quit," Phyllis continued.

"How do you know that?"

"Those resignation papers of yours? They never made it to me. They're still in their envelope, on her desk. Unopened. Why do you think that is?"

I looked at the lake, at the wind-ruffled water and the grass that swayed and tossed on the naked hills. Oly and Foremost relaxed back on the bench now and spoke slowly to each other.

"I don't know, Phyllis. I just don't know."

"Think about it, Tony."

I thought about a lot of things as Foremost and I drove back into town. I stuffed the tokens in their oilcloth under the seat and drove back by a different route than the one I used to get to Oly's place. Training: never use the same route back from a location that you used to get there. Old habits from the Service died hard, and I decided sometimes it was good to keep in practice. Particularly with strange tracks and strange people walking around town.

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We stopped at the house. I found a note taped on the back door that said Rose and Steve were at the church, and I was supposed to go directly to the cemetery. Bob was already out there to get things ready.

I changed clothes and carefully adjusted my holster so my handgun did not bulge under the suitcoat. Foremost scraped the mud off his feet and put on a clean robe. We met in the kitchen.

"How do I look?" Foremost asked.

He looked like a giant wolverine with funny-looking hands. He looked like the kind of person who could spend an hour discussing the nuances of fish-based moonshine with a stranger from the hills. He looked like the kind of person who brought strangers into my town and problems into my life.

He looked like someone under my protection.

"You look fine," I said. "Come on. Get in the car."

We drove down the side streets, strangely abandoned by the children who had been scrubbed, poured into suits and dresses, and then marched to church for the funeral. We crossed Main and drove past cars and trucks parked on the grassy strips next to the church.

The church was Methodist, with a three-story-tall steeple that was the highest point in town. A giant cross, half the gold paint flaked off, topped the structure proudly. White paint on clapboard, six-foot-tall stained-glass windows, and a set of walk-up concrete steps to the main entrance finished off the picture.

"You have many different religions here?"

"Not so many as some towns, but a few. Methodists go here. Catholics go to Blue Cloud Abbey outside of town. Lakota might go to the shaman and a sweat lodge," I said.

"Your line goes to this church?" he asked, and nodded toward the church.

"Some do," I said. "Some go to the other places. We're all mixed up."

We left town gravel behind and drove on county gravel. It sounded like the same thing, gravel was gravel, but even in Summit there was a difference between the town and the country. It was a small thing, hardly noticeable to outsiders, but town gravel roads were graded and smoothed while the country roads were ridged like corduroy. A little thing, but I had seen fights break out at Sam's Pool Hall over less.

We bounced on county gravel while the clouds thickened up and got darker. A fleck of snow, huge and fat, struck the windshield. It stuck there, pinned like some exotic butterfly on display, then melted into a wet spot and a tiny droplet that streamed down the glass.

I turned left at a crossroads and went down the cemetery road. The surface was mixed gravel and dirt now, humped up in long ridges down both sides of the road. Once a year a grader might force its way down here, to level out the ridges and throw down new gravel.

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Maybe.

If the county budget was in good shape that year.

And it looked as if the budget had been in trouble for a long time.

I drove down the tire marks of other vehicles and used the bottom of the car as my own grader when I needed. Sometimes this put me on the right hand side of the road, sometimes on the left. Foremost hung on tight and looked straight ahead.

Marshes and sloughs, tiny wetlands filled with reeds and tall grass and old decayed fence posts with the rusted barbed wire still attached filled the fields on both sides of us whenever the road crossed a low spot. Jays and sparrows and blackbirds perched on anything dry and watched us as we passed. I watched Foremost as his head jerked like the birds, and wondered what the hell was going on inside that brain.

We turned once again and we were at the cemetery.

Raw headstones, shaped but not yet engraved or polished, lay together in a gray tumbled pile in the ditch next to the crossroads. Tall grass, mixed brown from last fall and fresh baby green new growth from this spring, sprouted through and around the stones like whiskers on a dead man's face.

The grass in the cemetery itself was clipped short and raked with military precision. Placed neatly in the field of green were the finished cousins of the headstones in the ditch. These, though, marched in strict rows, ordered by family and line, across the cemetery. Men and women, the important in life and those that passed through unnoticed, were all equal here. The only concession to sentiment was the small headstones of the children, tucked in close to their mothers. Bouquets of flowers, some real and withered, some plastic and worn, filled the cupholders of the children's headstones.

I saw Bob's car, the backhoe used to dig the grave, and a green canvas tent. The tent stood next to a pile of fresh black and brown dirt flecked with white glacial stone. Folding chairs were set up in two small rows under the tent and faced the grave.

I looked for Bob but didn't see him. What I did see were so many ambush sites where a shooter could lay up and hide that I almost turned around and took Foremost back into town right then and there.

Trees pushed up next to the cemetery on one side and provided excellent cover. Across the road, the flax field was plowed and planted and empty, with a tremendous field of fire. Sloughs covered both of the other sides, so that we were in a kind of island, surrounded by trouble. Most times I thought of the cemetery as beautiful, peaceful even.

But not when there were strange tracks around my town. And where the hell was Bob?

I drove slowly down the rutted dirt track, dotted here and there with a flash of white that was last year's crushed paving stone, toward the

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grave. I pulled the car into line next to Bob's, passenger side facing his car. Then I loosened my gun in the holster, and opened the car door.

"Do you want me in or out?" Foremost asked.

"What kind of weapon would a killer from your ship have?"

"Pumped laser."

"Could it cut through the car?"

"Yes. Easily."

"What kind of surveillance and identification equipment would they use?" I asked.

"There are many," Foremost said. "They might use a body-heat scanner or a low-light analyzer. Or any of a dozen other devices."

I thought for a moment. With the tint dialed to full on the car windows, Foremost was invisible inside. Invisible, that is, to the bare-eyed locals around Summit. I was pretty sure my little window-tint trick wouldn't keep him invisible to an assassin with military-level surveillance and identification gear. Foremost wasn't built to be able to slip down to the floorboards and hide, so he sat up straight and provided a perfect silhouette to any sniper who could see him.

"Might as well get out then. Better to be a moving target than one that sits and waits," I said.

We shut the doors behind us softly, but it still seemed loud.

"Bob?" I called.

"Down here," came his voice.

We walked closer to the grave.

"Where?"

"Down here," he repeated.

We walked to the lip of the grave and looked down. The grave was about eight feet deep, with the concrete lining sunk into the bottom six feet of that so two feet of dirt remained on top to grow grass. Bob stood in the center of the open concrete box and looked up at us.

"What the hell are you doing down there?" I asked.

He looked embarrassed. He slapped his hands together to knock off dirt and smiled.

"I wondered what it was like to be buried. I thought I'd just come down, feel it for a couple minutes, and come back out."

"And?"

"And I can't get out of the damned grave now. The concrete is too slick and the ground is too muddy. Give me a hand."

I looked at our clean clothes and the mud. Bob was dressed in casual clothing, streaked with brown and black dirt.

"Where're your funeral clothes?"

"In the car. I figured I'd change after I did this and no one would ever know."

"Sweet Jesus," I said disgustedly. "I didn't bring any spare clothes. And

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I don't want to think about what Aunt Gladys will say if I'm all covered with mud during the burial. Hold on a minute while I think of something."

I went back to the car. I figured there must be something in the trunk, snow chains left over from winter or an old piece of rope or hose, that I could let down to him to get him out and still stay clean myself. I reached in my pocket and fumbled with my keys. They dropped to the ground and I swore mildly and bent over to pick them up.

The rear bumper blinked at me.

I hit the ground and rolled. Foremost shouted and flung up his arms. He staggered and stumbled backward, his arms flung wide. A cloud of steam engulfed him.

The light flashed again, and this time I saw the laser flare and burn part of Foremost's robe. Jets of steam spurted from his clothes around his neck and armpits and waist and he hit the ground and lay motionless, half in the grave, half out.

I was up and moving, gun in my hand. I put the car between myself and the grove of trees where I saw the laser flash.

"Bob, you okay?"

"What the hell is going on up there?" he shouted back.

"Just shut up and do what I tell you," I said. "Can you drag Foremost down in there with you?"

I heard Bob grunt, the sound of something heavy scraping on the grass and dirt, and another deeper grunt from Bob.

"Got him."

"He alive?"

"He's breathing," Bob said. "Not real regular, but he's breathing."

"Just keep him that way," I said.

What would I do if I was the shooter? Foremost was down, hit twice, but there was no guarantee he was dead. The steam was the giveaway. A laser cuts cleanly through fabric and messily through flesh. It never sends out jets of steam. Which meant Foremost had some kind of protective layer underneath his robe to dissipate the laser heat. Was it tough enough to handle two shots?

The shooter had to be certain.

I glanced quickly underneath the car and saw a figure with a pair of feet coming toward the car at a trot. I took three deep breaths and came over the top of the hood, gun outstretched.

I fired three times, direct hits to the body. The creature, short and squat and all in gray so I could not tell what was clothing and what was skin, jerked at the impacts but kept on coming. It stared at me with a fixed caricature of a wild grin on its face, writhing tentacles where I had teeth, a thin slash of bone where I had lips. Then it shuffled its feet for balance and aimed the laser at me.

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The grin widened and I knew I was dead.

The head exploded.

The body stood for a moment, fixed, as if it meant to keep on coming, as if the loss of its head was nothing more than a minor inconvenience. I worried for the same moment that with this alien that might be true, that the head was nothing more than a place to put the eyes, that the brain might be in the torso.

Then the body crumpled and collapsed.

I ran to the shooter, my gun out and level, ready to fire if I saw a flicker of movement. When I got closer I kicked the laser away, far out of reach, and felt the body. It was cool to the touch, and lumpy, like a plastic bag full of rocks.

"It is called a Synth."

I looked over my shoulder and saw Bob and Foremost, their clothes smeared with dirt. Bob stared at the alien, shook his head slowly, and went over to look at the laser.

"Do not try to use it," Foremost warned. "The odds are good it is a personal weapon, keyed to the Synth."

"Booby-trapped?" Bob asked.

"I don't know the word," Foremost said.

"Rigged to explode if someone other than the owner tries to use it," Bob explained.

"Probably," Foremost agreed.

I stared at the country around me. The grass moved in waves to the winds, and the trees in the little forest rubbed and swayed in rhythm.

"Do they travel in pairs?" I asked.

"No, strictly alone. They are living killing machines. Put them in an area, give them instructions, and let them do their work. If you put two in an area they would most likely kill each other," Foremost said.

"Hard to keep a species going that way," I said.

"They manage somehow," Foremost said dryly.

I stood and looked down at the Synth. Up close, the gray was partly clothing and partly skin, so close in color to each other that they blended to form a whole that was difficult to focus on. The alien looked like a silly-putty man, and I wondered if the rain would dissolve the skin and clothes and wash them into the grass.

I saw three smudge marks on the alien's chest where my bullets struck some kind of protective vest. I looked at the marks and, for just a moment, I was pleased with myself. The bullet pattern was tight, the black smears close together, and I knew my old firearms instructor at the Service would be pleased. The Synth itself looked enough like one of the practice dummies at the Academy that I half expected it to snap back upright when this little exercise was over. But the rain puddled on the clothes and formed droplets on the skin and the Synth stayed dead.

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"Indian, you can come out now," I said, my voice pitched to carry against the weather.

Indian, his fatigue jacket smeared with a few new grass stains that would soon dry and mix with all the others, drew himself up from the edge of the trees. He wore a broad-brimmed hat with snap-down ear flaps, just as dirty and stained as the rest of his clothing. He carried a scoped rifle, as clean and well-tended as an opposite could be. He pointed down the road, then disappeared back in the trees.

"Funeral procession is coming down the road," Bob said. I looked up and saw a black hearse, with a procession of other cars behind it. I kicked the Synth.

"How the hell do I explain this?" I growled.

"Don't need to," Bob said. "This is Summit. That's all you need to know, and all you need to say."

Carole showed up about an hour after dusk, when the street lights on Main Street were just starting to get into some real work. Foremost and Oly and I sat on the steps outside the pool hall and passed a glass jar of fish back and forth. Bullhead, if I remember right. Bob and Steve and Rose were inside, acting as hosts for Sam's wake. I could tell, from the rising level of voices and music and laughter inside, that the party was just starting to take off.

Driving down the street, Carole saw us, and turned to parallel park in front of the pool hall. She stopped the car and the driver's side window rolled down. Even through the sharp cut shadows from the street lights I could see the relief on her face.

"All I thought about on the way down here was that you might be dead. Every time I closed my eyes on the plane I saw you in a coffin," she said, her voice soft and tired. She turned her head a little to the side. "I'm glad you're all right, too, Ambassador."

I'm glad you're all right, too, Ambassador? I struggled with the thought that Carole spent the trip worried about me. Something of my confusion must have shown on my face. She smiled.

"You don't work for me anymore, do you? Then I can worry about you now."

"And before?" I asked.

"You were an agent. You had a job to do, and I had a job to do."

"I wasn't a person before, and now I am?"

"You were a person before," she said carefully, "and an agent."

"And now?"

She smiled again. Her face relaxed in a way I never remembered from Washington. I realized I liked that smile very much, and wondered where she'd kept it all those years. I suddenly wanted to make her smile again.

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She started to get out of her car and I shook my head.

She stopped for a moment, her face frozen, and the old mask snapped back into place. For a moment I saw pain and hurt and loneliness. Then it was gone, and it was the Washington face back again.

"Of course," she said carefully. "I understand."

"No, you don't," I said. "Park the car around the corner. We're keeping Main Street clear. Then come back here. We need to talk."

I moved over on the step a little and pushed Foremost with my butt, to move him down and make a space for her next to me. She watched me, startled at the way I touched him, and even more surprised when he accepted it without complaint. She smiled that smile again, and I was damned pleased with myself.

She drove around the corner, parked, and came back. She sat next to me. She wore a parka with a fur fringe and she fit just right next to me. Foremost passed her the glass jar of moonshine and fish. She wrinkled her nose at the smell.

"Tony, what is this stuff?"

"Ancient family drink," I said. I took the jar from her, sipped to show it was safe, then wiped the rim with my shirt sleeve to clean it. I felt awkward and clumsy and about twelve years old while next to me sat the prettiest girl I knew. I waited for her to look up, to see it was really me sitting next to her—not some perfectly turned-out diplomat with ideal manners and looks. Then I figured she would carefully and politely edge away from me and go find someone better to be around. I handed her back the jar. "It's really all right to drink."

She took the jar, looked up at me with total confidence, and took a small sip. She handed the jar back.

"What's going on out here?" she asked.

Main Street was strangely abandoned, even for Summit. Not a car was parked on the street, and the black asphalt was carefully chipped and scraped and cleaned so that it almost gleamed under the street light. A pair of freshly painted white lines, like the guard lines for a pedestrian crossing, stretched across the street.

"Time for the races," Oly said. Foremost nodded.

Around the corner came Teddy Wahford on his golf cart, and Indian on his town car. They lined up carefully side by side between the lines. Limbo, dressed in a short-sleeved shirt even as his breath came out in puffs in the cold, stepped between them. He carried two small construction worker flags, one in each hand, their color drained by the overhead sodium light until the flags seemed more like a muddy gray than a bright orange. Foremost leaned back and banged his fist on the pool hall door. Bob opened the door from inside. Waves of noise and heat and light washed over us from inside.

"Yeah?"

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"First race is ready," Foremost said.

"About time," Bob said. He shut the door and we heard him pounding on the long bar and shouting. Everything went quiet for a moment and then the door banged open and the crowd spilled outside with a roar.

Carole grabbed my arm for balance as the crowd shoved past us.

"What the hell is going on?" she asked again.

Chuck the bartender brought out a metal washtub filled with ice and cans of beer. He looked down at me as he walked past.

"Race beer should be in bottles," he growled disapprovingly. "Gets cold faster."

"It's cold enough already," I said as my breath puffed into the night air. "And you can't cut anyone with a can if someone gets angry about the race results."

Chuck set down the tub on the curb next to Steve and Rose and Bob. They sold the beer as fast as they could pull the cans out of the ice and water.

"You sell the beer at a wake? That's one hell of a way to make money," Carole asked. I shook my head.

"No, we won't make any money off this," I said. "The first round was free, and in the morning we'll take everything we made off all the rest of the beer and donate it to the town emergency heating fund."

"Then why charge for the beer?"

"If it was free everyone would take too much. All we'd have left by now would be a bunch of passed-out drunks. This way most of them are still awake."

"And that is important," Foremost added knowledgeably. Carole looked puzzled.

"Each person who knew Sam gives back what they did best at his wake," he explained. Steve overheard him and nodded, pleased.

"Ten on Teddy. I heard he got a new charge in his cart," Steve said.

"Ten on Indian," Foremost answered. He looked at me almost apologetically. "It would be disloyal to do anything else."

Limbo dropped the flags and the racers rolled ahead. The golf cart was almost silent, just a high-pitched whine, but Indian's town car roared and screamed. The crowd answered back.

Foremost leaned next to me and spoke quietly into my ear.

"We need to talk," he said.

"About?"

"I contacted my friends on the ship after the Synth attack. My enemies obviously know I'm alive and where I'm located. I wanted to give my friends the same advantage."

"Sounds like a good idea," I said.

"I also told them everything we know about the Synth attack," Foremost said.

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On the street, Indian's town car suddenly swerved into Teddy and bounced off the protective rubber bumpers attached all around the body of his golf cart. Teddy swore and shook his fist at Indian. Indian smiled back, his eyes glazed, and tipped his hat to Teddy. The crowd roared its approval.

"And?" I asked Foremost when it got quiet enough to hear him.

"They asked me to give you their thanks, for keeping me alive. They also put a protective air and space patrol over Summit for tonight. In the morning they'll be down with transport to take me home," Foremost said.

He sat next to me on the stoop, the cowl of his robe thrown back so he could use all his peripheral vision, his snout pointed straight at me. His eyes were very flat and black, with the silky gleam you see on creek stones when just the barest sheet of water flows over them.

"Sounds like a plan," I said. "Why wait until morning?"

"Because I wanted to talk with you," he said.

I sipped the last of my fish and put the jar down on the street, out of the way next to the steps so no one would accidentally break the glass. Foremost and I seemed to be locked inside our own little bubble of silence, the noise of the crowd unimportant and distant. I looked at him directly.

"What do you want to talk about?" I asked.

"You've heard that we plan to take some humans with us when we leave?"

"I've heard," I said. "I never understood why."

"From each world we take a society," he said quietly. "The ship is huge, but space is bigger. We will never come back here again. But we want to take part of you with us."

"Why?"

"Because we never know what we'll face out there," Foremost said. "All we know is that every planet is going to be different. And the more differences we have on the ship to choose from, the greater the chance that someone we have on-board will be able to talk with and understand whoever it is we meet."

The town car was more powerful, but Indian couldn't seem to steer a straight line. Foremost had bought him all the beer he could drink after the burial, to pay him back for his work that afternoon. Indian's capacity for alcohol was tremendous, but by now I was sure he saw three or four roads, not just one. Teddy, on the other hand, figured out the best path and held to it, his head tucked down as if to reduce his wind resistance.

I looked around me, at my line and all the others that made up Summit. Every year there were fewer of us, as more and more children left for the cities. I remembered those children, the exiles as they called themselves, from the East Coast reunions. They always seemed angry and lost, as if they never quite fit in outside of Dakota.

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As I never quite fit in.

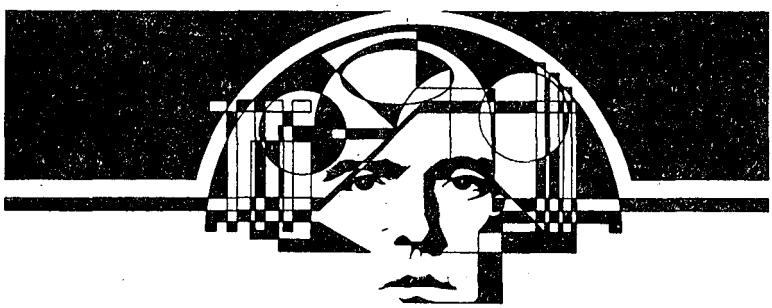
I leaned back to Foremost.

"We can talk," I said. I leaned forward and took a fresh jar of fish from Oly. I sipped and tried to figure out what kind of fish was in this batch. Northern Pike was my guess. "But tomorrow. Not tonight. Tonight is for Sam."

Foremost nodded and I handed the jar to Carole.

Indian's town car swept by me and kicked up gravel and I felt something sting my cheek.

"That bastard put the blade back on his town car to make it go faster! Indian, get your butt over here . . ." ●



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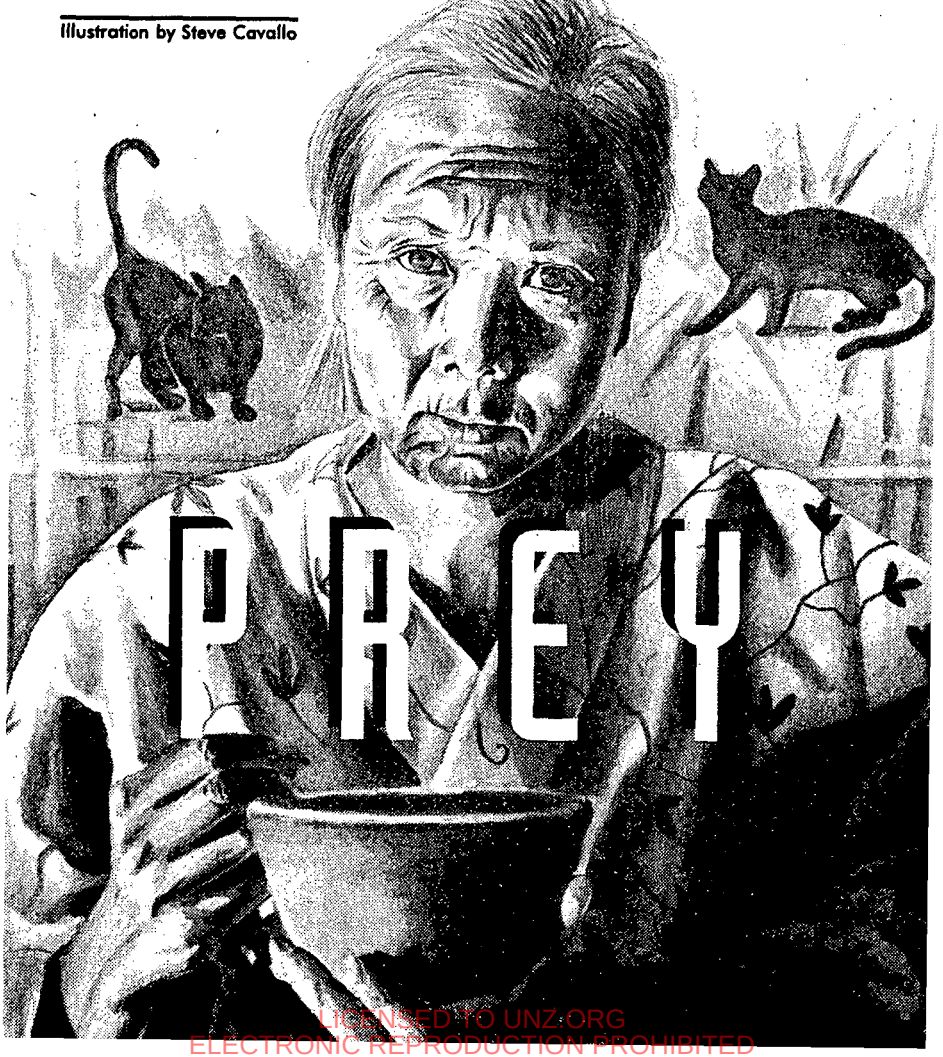
Esther M. Friesner

Esther M. Friesner's last short story for *Asimov's*, "Death and the Librarian" (December 1994), was the winner of the 1995 Nebula award. Ms. Friesner's most recent novel, *The Sword of Mary*, was published by White Wolf late last year. It's a sequel to *The Psalms of Herod*, which was released in 1995. Her next book, *To Storm Heaven*, is a Star Trek: The Next Generation novel that will be out in November. At the moment, Ms. Friesner is editing the Amazon comedy anthology *Did You Say Chicks?*—a sequel to her *Chicks in Chainmail* (1995)—for Baen Books.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo



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Under the lights, Yoshi is more beautiful than any man she has ever seen. Alana feels her fingers curl, pictures her claws extending. They are only fingernails, like any common woman's, but she will fix that later, if she likes. Alana is always fixing things.

Her mouth is dry. Her small pink tongue dances over the scaly edges of her lips as she watches him. She wears no lipstick. She has replaced it with injectable bursts of color that tint her mouth whatever shade she desires and swell her lips until they ache. Alana cannot abide lipstick. The sheerest shade is still a layer that gets between her skin and raw sensation.

The music dins in her ears. All around her, the audience heaves and undulates like the back of a great dragon. They are on their feet, dancing, swaying, couples clasped tight one to the other, hip to hip, pressing themselves together as close and closer than clothing will allow. A flicker of movement to her right momentarily hooks her eye away from Yoshi and she sees a tall young man standing, back arched, head tilted back as if to catch music in his mouth like drops of rain. Before him a girl in shimmering netware kneels and worships him with her tongue.

Alana lifts one finger. The men who attend her cannot fail to catch the change in the light glittering off herrings. She has harvested all her bodyguards from the dead city streets, picked them like the rarest flowers, making them a garland of pretty posies to ring her 'round. When they wither, she casts them back into the city.

That overeager young man and his over-obedient young woman are spoiling the atmosphere for Alana. A twitch of her finger—no more!—and two of her men are there to grip the offenders firmly and escort them out. The young man objects stridently. Alana studiously looks away. Her men know how to deal with objections, understand the authority of *fait accompli*. The music swallows the sounds of what must happen. Alana closes her eyes. She commands her world to be only Yoshi.

Beautiful Yoshi! Skin that shimmers with the precious gleam of ivory silk slipping through Alana's fingers. Hair sleek and black, long, caught away from the face with silver combs whose teeth Alana envies because a sudden toss of that small, finely formed head may allow them to bite into Yoshi's tender scalp, drawing blood. Her mouth is drier than before, her lower lip is throbbing. She has been nibbling on it until it swells, a berry ripe with juice.

Yoshi ends his song, but the arena still shudders with the cheers and screams of his worshipers. Alana clutches her hands tight, angry. Don't these fools realize, don't they know that if they would only shut up, cut off all sound when he was done singing, the sudden silence would have the power to end the world? Her heart claws at her, commanding the immolation of silence.

The crowd is chanting now. "Yo-shi! Yo-shi! Yo-shi! Yo-shi!" In the tiered rows scaling up the arena's bowl-shaped sides Alana hears them

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begin to perform for him,mastered by nothing more than their devotion. Yoshi's voice first came to them against a background of two massed choirs whose several parts set up a song that mimicked the deep, full-chested reverberation of great temple bells. Voices boomed off other voices, each echo reaching down to touch the bone. And then, against so much power, the silvery insinuation of Yoshi's lone voice, delving to the marrow and drinking it dry.

A man is speaking with one of Alana's bodyguards. She glimpses this from the corner of one gold-flecked eye. The voices should not be able to reach her, above the concert's din, but they do. Although the crowd roars and Yoshi's band is pulling another song out of the abyss of silence, Alana hears everything. All of her bodyguards are wired to her. It goes with the job.

"—spoke to her," the newcome man is saying to Alana's guard. The tiny transmitter leeched to the guard's throat is working well. "She says she wants to speak with Ms. Amir personally first."

"Didn't you make it clear what we're offering?" the guard demands. Alana's brows dip in a momentary frown. *We?* Punishment. She makes a mental note and tastes anticipation as she considers which shape the punishment can take to most amuse her.

Alana hears a snort. She glances towards the two men in time to see the stranger shrug and hear him say, "She doesn't care about the money—" The guard's laughter is harsh and short. "All right, all right, that's not it—not exactly. She cares about something else more than the money, okay?"

"What?" The guard sounds like a skeptical six-year-old who has been told one too many fairy tales.

"That's what she wants to discuss with Ms. Amir."

"What is she, nuts?" Alana sees the guard's perplexed expression. He does not lack imagination, merely wealth. Only those who have lived long enough with the surety of money can imagine there are other things that matter more.

The stranger shakes his head. "I wouldn't know. I only work for her." The lights illuminating Yoshi's concert reflect from his face, warpaint of violet, green and gold.

"You don't need to know. The 'tain-net knows for you." The guard chuckles. "They say they've seen it all before: Stage mamas who can't handle it when their kids hit it big. Go figure. My mama'd be too busy going mall-crazy if I hit it that big, but she'd stay sane."

The stranger shrugs again. "They're different in Japan."

"Yeah, I guess." The guard agrees. It is easier than thinking. "The nets say she's made him nuts too."

"Yoshi?" Terse, bitter laughter. "Yeah, maybe he is nuts. I'm not sure what he is."

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This has gone far enough. Alana can barely concentrate on Yoshi's silver crystal beauty because of all the chatter. She touches one of the diamonds whose prongs adorn her throat and murmurs commands. The guards all tense, their heads snapping towards her, eyes glowing red as nightsight overlaid pupils activate. Her will is their world.

Her lips frame the words, *Backstage. Now.* Her guards become a human five-panel screen around her, folding inward into a pentagon whose apex pierces the crowd with ease. They know where they are going. Like their employer, they accept no excuses. The messenger from Yoshi's *mamagon* stays behind (if the nets can call her *mamagon*—monster-mother—Alana may also claim the right). Or perhaps he follows. He is unimportant to Alana now. What does not concern her ceases to be.

Backstage the lights are all white and the walls are all green. Alana and her entourage sweep past beneath the glare that reveals too much, that cheats illusion. Money opens doors, but Alana has hired other hands to hold the keys. Alana does not need drugs; she makes a commerce of dreams. It is a shock for her to catch sight of actual bills changing hands—her guards slipping cash to each backstage Cerberus they pass. Sometimes she wonders whether bills and coins still feel the same—coarse, inelegant, *real*. She has made her life into something rainbow-winged that soars high and far above all hint of rough vulgarity. It irks her to think that this sole aspect of it can be as easily handled by a panhandler as a priest.

At last they reach the proper door. The strange man who is the messenger is there as well. The wall has torn away like a chrysalis to hatch him. Alana wonders if his rumpled shirt will smooth into wings once he has crept into the light. "I must announce you to Ms. Nakata," he says.

One of Alana's guards steps forward, making the air crackle with menace. "Do you know who you're talking to?" he demands. It's a stupid question. Alana touches his forearm, makes him turn, and he sees the gravity of his mistake in her eyes. She has come to understand much of what the Japanese have known for centuries: Where there is need, where sustenance hangs in the balance, there is always another soul to replace one that does not meet the employer's requirements. This lesson, too, she has passed on to her men. She sees the guard's eyes shimmer with the promise of anxious tears and craves to dab them away with sharp, tiny touches of her tongue.

"Announce me, then," she tells the messenger. His skin pales under her stare. He bows stiffly and ducks into the dressing room, to reappear shortly and declare that Ms. Nakata will see her now. Alone.

"I will see Ms. Nakata," she says.

Her guards do not object. Alana is wired with enough defense and delay devices to keep off most conventional assaults until her men can fly to the aid of their mistress. Too, enough credit has changed hands to give

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them dependable intelligence reports as to any potential perils Alana might face in that room, with that woman. There is nothing to fear, and the leaves of her human screen unfold. She glides through the door, her silk trousers whispering as they brush against the frame. The door closes, and she is in Yoshi's dressing room.

Here the lights are pink and the air holds his naked scent. She closes her eyes and feels the drift of desire's ghosts over her skin. The room is small and there is only one chamber. A star of Yoshi's magnitude could command a suite of rooms, but he never does; she knows this. When she wants something, she makes it her business to learn as much about it as there is to know.

One room, lit by a golden lamp that hangs like an inverted lotus from the ceiling. There is a utilitarian makeup table, but its ring of bulbs is extinguished. The chair before it is hard backed, hard seated, shiny black. The makeup table is the only ascetic note in the room, a hermit stumbling into a house of pleasure.

Cushions are freely strewn over the floor as hint and invitation. Against the left-hand wall, a narrow bed stands transformed into a welcome and a lure by the enticing softness of the fine cotton futons and pillows that tumble from it in an avalanche of sunset color. Incense burns in a deceptively simple bowl of pure white porcelain. Walls hung with squares of silk, walls hung with oblongs of linen, walls hung with paper scrolls fine as flower petals, and scattered over silk and linen and whisper-thin scroll, limned everywhere, the cats.

There are cats made splendid by a thousand threads of metallic embroidery and cats that are no more than two strokes of a master's ink brush. Cats crouch on miniature gold-leafed screens and say their prayers for the fall of every thoughtless sparrow among the tousled heads of late chrysanthemums. Alana pauses before a woodblock print that shows a stately Yoshiwara geisha regarding the full moon through sprays of wisteria in a midnight garden. Her lacquered combs sweep up a woman's hair from the pointed face of a prim three-colored cat, and paws hold her fan.

Shrill tittering shaves the protective layer of calm from Alana's nerves. "You like that one, my dear?" The voice is like pebbles sliding down a piece of slate. "I thought you might. You know the story, then?"

Alana turns and sees an old woman, sleekly fat, curled up into a ball of flesh among the pillows that have tumbled from the bed to the floor. Her bulk is tightly upholstered in red and blue satin, a kimono of such blatant bad taste that it hurts Alana's eyes to look at it too long. Between her knees, the old woman cradles a yellow bowl brimming with sunflower seeds. Speaking or silent, she cracks them, gobbling the white kernels, spitting out the black shells like witch's fingernail parings. Her skin shows brown beneath a poorly applied layer of pearly white cosmetic. Brown teeth peek a gappy smile from behind meticulously painted scar-

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let lips. Her face is perfectly round, wrinkled as the meat of a walnut. The *netsuke* artisans who capture grotesqueries in miniature would vie for the chance to do her justice.

Alana has no taste for *netsuke,* or for the beauty within the bizarre. All she knows of this old woman is that she is the door through which Alana must pass if she is to have Yoshi. She folds one leg under her and settles herself on the bed, pretending interest in the cats. That way, at least, she will not need to look at the old woman.

"These are beautiful," she says, gesturing at the pictures. Her Japanese is much better than the woman's English. It is the ultimate blessing Alana can offer, to name a thing beautiful. "But since you are Yoshi's mother, you can't help but appreciate beauty."

The old woman scowls, making her face even less beautiful than it already is. "Air!" she spits. And it is her darkest condemnation. "Words." Her painted lips twist in bitterness. "I did not think I would know you for what you are so soon. You want him, my beloved Yoshi, the way you want another toy." She is still speaking English. Sometimes her voice trills upwards, turning facts to questions that are not there.

Alana bows her head. Alana will never bow her body,unless she must; and then, someone else will pay for it after. "You misunderstand." She speaks with all the proper shades and nuances of courtesy appropriate for this conversation, this person. She even adds a trifle more. If she can have what she desires by easy means, she will be just as happy. She is not in the mood for the more direct methods today.

Moods change.

"I will ask you again," the old woman says. The breath hisses between her mud-colored teeth. She looks as if she has eaten her way out of the grave. "You are rich, but you seem to be a polite child. This time you will make me a proper answer: Do you know the story? *This* story?"

There is a whistle and a splat as a damp sunflower seed shell flies through the air, striking the scroll that bears the picture of the cat-faced geisha and the moon. The moist black oval sticks to the carefully drawn wisteria blossoms.

Alana's mouth grows tight. The old woman has destroyed something that Alana found beautiful. In her heart, Alana holds the comfortable idea that she is one of the chosen, the creators. It does not matter that she has created nothing so far—nothing beyond the work of art that is her life. She is still a creator—she has decided this is so, by *fiat*—and only creators have the right to destroy.

She looks at the ruined scroll. There is a column of characters tumbling from the edge of the geisha's fan. To read them is child's play—her language modules have always been all-inclusive, the best. There is enough of the legend there to let her say, "There was a cat who turned herself into a geisha for love of her owner."

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The old woman leans forward, plump hands clutching her knees. "And? And?" A fragment of sunflower seed dangles from her upper lip like a fang.

Alana shrugs. "I mean no disrespect," she says. "I don't know what more you want me to say. And I don't see what this has to do with my offer to you . . . and Yoshi."

The old woman's laughter makes Alana clench her teeth. "*Offer!*" the hag echoes. "Why didn't you just ask me whether my darling has a fixed set of rates for every rich bitch who has come crawling to me before this, whining for a chance to have him fuck her?"

Alana stiffens. She could have this terrible old woman killed here and now. A word, and her guards will be in this room, tearing the flabby stomach open, filling the yellow bowl with blood.

But that will not get her Yoshi.

Alana unfolds her legs and lets herself slip from the bed to the floor. She curves her body forward in the humblest of bows, a kowtow that brings her forehead to the floor before the old woman. She sees bare brown feet, the nails as yellow as the bowl of seeds, heel and toe thick with skin hard as a parrot's beak. The ugly feet smell of tuberose and lanolin.

"Forgive me," Alana murmurs. And these words too she adds to the sum that will be paid out in the old woman's eventual death.

The creature is mollified, her pride hand-fed by Alana's expert touch. Soon she and Alana are seated side by side on the floor. There is *sake* in stoneware cups, and then there is twenty-year-old Scotch in crystal tumblers. Alana insists on sending her men out to fetch the best, to expunge the offense she gave—Oh, but never meant to give!—to her good friend Ms. Nakata.

The old woman gulps the Scotch. To her it might as well be swill. She is Japanese, but she lacks the refinement of beauty that Alana firmly believes must be an intrinsic part of anyone born in that tatter of islands. She thinks Ms. Nakata does not deserve to be Japanese. She is just as certain that she herself does.

"I was once poor," the old woman says, revealing nothing Alana does not already know. This room, these clothes, the coarse directness of her every action, all these betray her more swiftly and completely than Alana's highest paid ear to the nets. "My people came from Hokkaido, you know. Do you know the north?" She does not give Alana time to reply before a guttural laugh rocks her. "Ha! How can you, when you do not even know the story of the cat?"

"My ignorance shames me," Alana murmurs.

"It should!" The old woman's mouth snaps shut like a miser's coin purse. "What you don't know—oh, ho, ho!" She wags a thick finger under Alana's nose. "You and your nets, your *information!* You curl yourself

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like a silkworm into a cocoon of wires and then wonder why you awaken in a bath of boiling water! You know *nothing*. In the north we don't know much about the network—*now* I know, yes—but we have knowledge there that your pretty wire web will never snare."

The old woman rocks back and forth on her buttocks, tilts her face to the ceiling, and begins to chant in nasal singsong. At first Alana wonders whether the hag has truly lost her mind. Then she realizes that this *mamagon* is droning out a story in a Japanese so rustic, so antiquated, that Alana will need to replay it and bring up her auxiliary linguistic implants before she can hope to understand.

And when she touches the sensitive place behind her right ear, what she hears leaves her believing that the implants have malfunctioned, or else this small fragment of the world held in Yoshi's dressing room is a cameo of exotic madness carved by an old woman's voice against a background of banality.

"There was once an old, old couple who had little in the world besides a cat," the hag intones. Alana hears it all, even those parts she originally missed. (In her world it never pays to miss anything, least of all words.) "They were poor, but despite their poverty they were devoted to the animal, who was all the child they ever had. One day they no longer had even the smallest measure of rice to cook, the smallest stick of wood to burn. They had nothing to sell, nothing to trade, nothing but the skin of poverty, which is thinner than the air that holds a rich man's promises.

"In their despair, they huddled together, awaiting death. The old woman turned to the old man and said, 'Husband, if we die, it is our karma. But at least let me see if I can persuade our neighbors to take our cat and give her a good home. Surely she is not meant to perish merely because we are too poor to live.' The old man nodded, giving his consent, for he too loved the cat as dearly as if it were a child.

"But when the old woman stood in the doorway of their hut and called for their pet to come, what was her surprise! Instead of the cat, there came to her call a young woman of surpassing beauty and elegance. She was dressed in the style of the most highly paid ladies of the water trade, and in her arms she cradled a samisen wrapped in green brocade the color of a cat's eyes. 'Who are you, honored lady?' the old woman asked. 'Are you lost?' The geisha bowed low and replied, 'Honored mother, I am not lost, for this has always been my home.'"

Alana makes an impatient noise. It is louder than she intended. The old woman's eyes snap open. Her last few words are still trickling into Alana's ear, replayed in translation, as she reverts to English and snarls, "So, you want the short version? Very well. I will be rid of you all the sooner. The geisha was the cat, and she gave herself willingly to the water trade in order to support the old couple who had raised her and loved her. Like any good child, she knew her duty and she fulfilled it, even

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though she hated the embraces of even those few clients wealthy enough to afford more than her sweet songs and graceful dances. One night, word came to the tea house that the old couple had died, but when they went to tell the geisha, she was gone."

"A cat again," Alana finishes for the hag. She is becoming eager for a new game. "So you want me to believe that Yoshi is another one like that legendary geisha? A cat, your cat, transformed?" Her eyebrows rise. She cannot restrain the phantom of a condescending smile.

"Do not mock what I have told you." There is no threat in the old woman's voice; it merely conveys information.

"I wouldn't dream of it. In fact, I can add to my original offer if you'll tell me how I can invest in the company that's doing such excellent biomorph—"

"You don't believe it." The old woman goes back to cracking sunflower seeds. She spits the shells into her cupped hand.

"Why? Is belief one of your terms?" Alana detaches a slim folder from her belt. It is no bigger than a business card case and its silvery fabric blends perfectly with what Alana wears. It contains an identification sliver whose liquid-crystal display proclaims precisely how much immediate credit Alana can command at this point in time. "Here is something for you to believe," she tells Yoshi's *mamagon.*

"Get out."

Alana rises to her feet. She wastes only half a glance at the yellow bowl, now almost empty of black seeds. A spark of surprise makes her take a second look. "That's jade," she says.

The old woman chortles, holding the bowl up to the light. "Antique yellow jade from Heian Kyo. It was a gift from one of my first clients."

"He loved you so much?" Alana searches the hag's face, seeking the remains of anything that might still be called beauty.

"You are a fool." It is said without malice. "You of all should know how little the gifts of the wealthy need to do with love." Her face closes. "I never knew love until he also gave me Yoshi."

"I love Yoshi," Alana says.

"You want him," the old woman responds. "The way you might want this." She tosses the bowl to Alana, who does not bother to catch it. It falls to the floor, rolls from the cushions unbroken. Sunflower seeds scatter in fractured black patterns that might hold the future.

Alana reads the future in the fallen seeds, in the old woman's face, and sees that as far as Ms. Nakata is concerned, it is a future free of any pairing of Alana and Yoshi. There is no further need for courtesy now. "You are a monster," she says, as if this is something she has just discovered.

The old woman's eyes crinkle so deeply with mirth that they are almost entirely swallowed up in the fat mounds of her cheeks. "Yoshi is the monster," she replies.

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Alana sniffs. "Because he's a cat that somehow—some fairy tale how—was transformed into a human being?"

"No." The old woman is calm as water running over smooth gray stones. "Only because he was a cat. All cats are monsters."

"And you surround yourself with them." Alana's hands pass before the images on the walls.

"Side with the monsters and you do not become their prey. The boy who could draw cats spent one night in an old, haunted temple," Yoshi's monster-mother says serenely. "Before he went to sleep, he drew cats on all the walls, all the *shoji*, then hid in a wooden chest. In the middle of the night, he heard the sounds of a horrible battle. When he awoke, the floor of the temple was strewn with the corpses of a thousand goblin rats, and the claws of every cat he had drawn on walls and paper screens dripped blood." She shows her teeth.

"What did that story have to do with—?"

"Do you still want Yoshi, goblin?"

Alana's eyes burn cold. "You want me to believe that he's your creation, yours to control; that he'd destroy me if you ordered him to, like a good son?"

"He is more to me than any son. When he saw my distress, my poverty, he came back to me as you see him. That is how much he is mine," says Ms. Nakata.

In her mind, Alana's fingers reach for a withered throat she does not yet dare touch. "You think I could never make him love me enough to turn him away from you."

"Love is only a word. The boy in the temple gave no orders to the cats he drew. He never loved them. He only gave them form; they behaved according to their nature, and the nature of every cat." The old woman's snaggle-toothed grin grates over Alana's nerves. "What do you think would have happened to the boy who drew cats if he had not hidden himself from the very destroyers he had created?"

Alana's patience begins to fray. "I didn't come her to answer riddles!"

"No, you came here to buy my blessing." She shakes her head. "Go away, fool."

Alana leaves, clapping her anger closed around her like a cape. She bursts from Yoshi's dressing room, transformed into the heart of a storm that only begins to blow away when she is in her limo, being driven home. Calm returns. Alana's scowl relents. The old woman is insane. This will make it all so much easier. In light of what she now knows, what she will do to the hag should really be viewed as a mercy. Not even the whisper of guilt will ever touch it, mar how perfectly *fitting* Alana's plan will be. She wants to go back, to kiss those wrinkled lips out of sheer thankfulness.

The old woman's madness has given her Yoshi.

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There are threads of truth even in the wildest ravings. Alana replays the conversation many times, picking out the filaments she can use and comparing them to facts she has gleaned from other sources of information. The old whore's lunacy has turned her bastard into a creature out of legend, a cat morphed to human shape by his devotion to his owner. But that is only the world as contained by her own warped mind. In Alana's world, all that matters is that Yoshi's devotion to filial duty remains a fact. And it is so. All the 'tain-nets bear this out, remarking on it whenever they speak of Yoshi. This is the strand of truth Alana covets, and from this strand she weaves her snare.

A death that looks like the work of nature is always costlier than a death that is blatantly the work of man. A death that relies on a designer virus with certain specified effects is costlier still, if you can find the trafficker willing to make sale and delivery in the first place.

Not a problem. Alana does know where to shop.

Ms. Nakata lingers long enough for Alana's purposes. She is held captive in a cage of pain that radiates from the core of her vitals to fingertips and feet that feel as if the small teeth of lizards are grinding flesh against bone slowly, very slowly. Yoshi's anguish is duly reported in the nets. Is it any wonder, then, that a woman as wealthy, as influential, as much a lover of music as Alana Amir hears of it and gently inquires if there is anything she can do to help?

If Ms. Nakata seeks to warn her adored Yoshi not to trust the steady, artful influx of gifts and attentions from Alana, she cannot: The virus' first choreographed feast was the cartilage of the old woman's larynx. When at last Yoshi opens the doors of his home to Alana, moved by this stranger's concern for his mother's plight, she enters like a queen. She gazes down from the height of her triumph into the eyes of her fallen rival and sees black hatred. Alana lets her first tears fall so that they strike Ms. Nakata's blazing eyes with the sting of salt. The old woman thrashes in her bed of cool percales while Alana makes quite certain Ms. Nakata sees her collapse weeping into Yoshi's arms.

There are stories Alana has bought. Why labor over your own lies when there are people to do these things for you? Alana could never hope to equal the simple plausibility of the professional. Through tears, she tells Yoshi of her own mother, now dead. (Dead and dancing in an Italian villa with her several lovers; but Yoshi only knows what he is told.) This is the reason Alana has been so drawn to his own mother's suffering, she says. She too was once as devoted a child as he. She knows how he feels, she feels for him, she *understands*. She reaches into the heart where his music is born and touches every string of it with a kiss.

She is very good. She rushes nothing. Time, too, can be bought; trust cannot. Trust must be wooed, and Alana has always enjoyed the hunt even more than the kill. She is almost sorry that the old woman's mad-

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ness holds no truth. If Yoshi were a cat, he would understand her even better, and joy with her in how sweetly she teases her prey to the inevitable conclusion of the hunt.

For it must conclude. Even the prettiest bird finally ceases to hold the cat's eye with the flutter of bright wings. In time, Alana knows that Yoshi is as much hers as ever he was his mother's. The first time he kisses her, she contrives to catch the tender corner of his lip with her sharpest tooth. His blood is blandly sweet. She thinks she might want more. Slyly she bites her own lip and utters a little whimper of pain. While she turns away, hand to lips, feigning that this accident was his doing, she savors the taste of his blood spiced with hers.

"I've hurt you!" he cries, and his guilt is plaited into the strand already circling his neck like a garrote hidden in a wreath of flowers.

They make love in his room. His caresses are shy at first, hers encouraging. Alana cries out quickly and often under his touch, even before he enters her. She wants the old woman to *know*. His own voice is a deep, murmurous thrumming that makes his whole body tremble in her arms. He gains boldness by the breath, until his eyes are glowing with desire, his hands and his mouth laying unquestioned claim to more of her than Alana intended to give him. There is no moment of his surrender to her, as her imagination painted it, no tenderness. He gives her no instant of exultation, no chance for the thought, *I've won!* All the victory of this encounter is his.

Face down in the pillows, she wonders if perhaps she has made a mistake.

And when at last he does envelop himself in her, she cries out louder, more shrilly. There is pain unlike any she has known, a thousand barbs of it. Her eyes fly wide, her nails dig into the sheets. She is no virgin; why pain? But then he is done—so suddenly she is almost unaware of it—and she is left to study a bloodstained sheet while Yoshi falls back against the pillows and sleeps.

She rises from the bed and pads out of the room, down the hall. The male nurse she hired stands watch at the bedroom door of an old woman whose life has become an enduring agony. He sees Alana and raises one eyebrow in silent question. It does not matter that Alana has come as she is from her lover's embrace, naked, her thighs dappled with more than shadows. He keeps his eyes on his owner's eyes. He too has been scavenged from the city.

"Do you think the old bitch heard us?" she asks.

"Yes, Ms. Amir," he answers.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Well . . . I did."

"I'd prefer more proof than that."

"Before, when you—" He draws back from the edge of speaking a word

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too much. "I heard some noise from her room a little while ago. When I went in, she'd torn the drug feeds out of her arm. She shouldn't have the strength left to do something like that, not unless—" He hesitates. Alana owns even the freedom of his tongue.

"—unless something really upset her," Alana finishes for him. There are strips of dim amber light to make the hallway glow like a candle-flame seen through oil. By this light, Alana smiles. "Good."

"When I tried to put them back in, she fought me," the nurse goes on.

"Fought you?" Alana is amused: The nurse could scoop up the tiny hag in one paw. "Like a cat, I suppose." Her own joke pleases her.

"I was afraid that if I pressed the point right then, she'd struggle so hard that she'd kill herself, and you said you didn't want her to—"

"I know what I said." Alana enters the old woman's room. Who will tell her that she may not?

Here lies a sight to make up for the unexpected pain of loving Yoshi. The old woman lies beneath a tousled white sheet blotched red. The undersides of both arms are raw meat. Alana's head fills with the warring smells of blood, urine, drugs, sweat. Naked, she seats herself carelessly on the edge of the bed and jabs the old woman's shoulder with two fingers. Papery eyelids open to slits, opaque black eyes fix themselves on hers.

"Lost," Alana says. "One cat. Answers to the name of Yoshi." She rests her hand under the old woman's jawline, over the ruined larynx, and leans forward, hard.

The eyes snap open, then roll back to show whites the color of butter. The chest rises and falls once, twice, three times before it stills. Alana lifts her hand from the wattled neck, and with absurd delicacy lets her fingers seek a pulse no longer there. She sits beside the corpse, regarding the work of her hands with the same satisfaction and sadness of any artist whose task is done.

One brown hand darts out. A fingernail slick with blood slashes across Alana's unprotected belly. Alana screams, flinging herself backwards, away from the nightmare.

But there is no nightmare. The nurse charges into the room and finds the old woman dead. At Alana's jabbered command he searches the chilling hands and finds no trace of blood on the nails.

No blood at all. None anywhere. The sheets are white as a bride's gown. The dead woman is whole, her drug feeds in place, her flesh intact. There is no sign that Alana's killing hand so much as touched her. But there is still the mark traced in shallow slashes on Alana's belly. There is still that.

Alana leaves the nurse to his chores with the dead. She hurries back down the hallway. Pain or no pain, she wants Yoshi.

Yoshi is gone.

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The 'tain-nets are full of the vanishment. Distraught fans in Japan report seeing a robed and hooded figure ascending the slope of Mt. Fuji, never to descend. They swear it was Yoshi. Others swear to having seen him embrace his death falling with outstretched arms from a seacliff's height, his beauty crucified against the air. Even Alana, who pays for truth and punishes rumormongers, cannot light upon the facts of his fate.

Alana has other things on her mind. Sleeping or waking, her body burns. She hungers for Yoshi, for the pain he gave her; that memory now transmutes to most exquisite pleasure. She commands her body to forget him, yet no matter how many other lovers she takes, she cannot. Even when she takes no lovers, she remembers.

The mark remembers. The bright red scar of it persists. It does not darken. It does not wash away. It is proof against the attentions of a hundred doctors. One of them remarks that it looks almost like the *kanji* character for fertility. He finds this funny, because he is also the one who tells her she is pregnant. When he performs the abortion and finds nothing, she sees how his sense of humor appreciates a change of profession.

Alana goes home and closes the door of her bedroom behind her. She finds a gift on her pillow. It is wrapped in the Japanese style, tied up in a white cloth knotted in the semblance of a flower. She summons one of her men, demanding to know the provenance of the gift. He admits ignorance by offering to take it away rather than give her an answer. She watches him carry the bundle out of the room, then looks back at her bed.

There is an identical white-wrapped parcel on the pillow. The cloth flower unfolds itself petal by petal to reveal the yellow jade bowl at its heart. Alana starts to call for aid a second time, then stops. She chooses instead to try the solidity of this illusion. She picks up the bowl.

It holds four black sunflower seeds and a black and white snapshot of a pretty, young Japanese woman. The edges of the photograph are deckled, product of an old-style camera. The woman wears a tawdry tailored suit that belongs to the heyday of Joan Crawford and Myrna Loy. She is holding the jade bowl—gray in this photograph—and in the bowl she holds a kitten, black and white, paws resting on the young woman's breast.

It was a gift from one of my first clients.

How long ago would such a hag entertain her first paying man? How could one so old be the mother of a man as young as Yoshi?

I never knew love until he also gave me Yoshi.

How long had that flower-faced kitten been dead?

The pangs strike as Alana stands there, crunching numbers in her head. The pain obliterates all numbers. She drops the bowl and the photograph. The four black seeds spin away. Alana calls out for help. There is none. The room that by now should be filling with her men is only filled with her agony. Her own voice shrieks inside her skull, echoes louder against the walls of pain.

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Alana's body folds in two, topples across the bed. Her clothing burns; she tears it away. Beneath the cloth her body glows with a pale radiance all its own. She sinks her nails into the headboard, drags herself half upright and through tears sees the crisp nail-strokes of the scar writhing into a new form: *nekko.*

Her fingers go slack as she sees the tiny claw poke up and out through the mound of her belly like the new moon rising from a bank of cloud. It carves the shape of the new-made character from within, scything through the flesh.

Nekko. Cat.

Alana screams as the first small, questing feline skull emerges from her torn belly, its sleek, fleshless head scarlet with birthing blood. She lies helpless as, one by one, its littermates drag themselves into the light in a clatter of little bones. Her firstborn struggles to pull itself up over her stomach with the swimming crawl of all newborn kittens.

Alana cannot look away, cannot close her eyes. The mist of birth blood vanishes from the kitten's bones, leaving them the shimmering color of Yoshi's skin. The hollows and the gaps between bone and bone are the black of Yoshi's hair. Just before it clamps the needle teeth of its mouth to her breast, its empty sockets fix her eyes with a look of absolute filial devotion.

Dying, Alana knows love. ●

Why the Dinosaurs Died

No one
taught them to say,
"Thank you"
or
"Excuse me"
or
"I'm sorry."

Their endless rudeness,
their ignorance of basic manners,
created infinite feuds.

Finally no
one was speaking
to anyone else.

They died of loneliness.

—Linda D. Addison

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NEXT ISSUE

JUNE LEAD STORY

Veteran writer **Charles L. Harness,** author of such classic works as *The Rose* and "The New Reality," makes his *Asimov's* debut next month with our lead story for June, a fast-paced, entertaining, and somewhat tongue-in-cheek extravaganza that explains for us the baffling cosmic mystery of "The Flag on Gorbachev Crater."

TOP-RANKED WRITERS

James Patrick Kelly, one of our most popular writers, whose story "Think Like A Dinosaur" won a Hugo Award last year, returns to take us to a seemingly tranquil future society for a chilling game of "Itsy Bitsy Spider"; British writers **Paul J. McAuley** and **Kim Newman** (making his *Asimov's* debut) join forces to spin a thrilling tale of Alien Invasion, warn us to Keep Watching The Skies, and examine some of the unexpected consequences of world-shaking events that can arise years down the road, in the wry but suspenseful "Residuals"; **Rebecca Ore** returns to give us a trenchant history lesson, in the saga of "Scarey Rose in Deep History"; new writer **Deborah Wheeler** makes a moving *Asimov's* debut with a bittersweet study of exile and redemption, in "Mother Africa"; new writer Greg Abraham returns with a look at some relationships that don't work out quite they way they were supposed to, and the consequences of that for the whole world, in the compelling "Front Man"; and **Sonia Orin Lyris** takes us to the far future and deep into interstellar space to show us the unexpected consequences of even the most benign and well-meaning of actions, in the vivid "Payback."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column examines "The Sense of an Ending"; **Norman Spinrad's** "On Books" transports us to "Mars"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features.

Look for our June issue on sale on your newsstand on April 29, 1997, or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the great stories that we have coming up for you this year!

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Stephen Baxter

SOLITON STAR

This master of hard SF's most recent American publications include *Voyage*, which came out from HarperPrism in January, and *Titan*, which will be released later this year. His 1995 book, The *Time Ships*, won the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for best novel, and an earlier book set in his Xeelee series, *Timelike Infinity*, recently won the Japanese Seiun Award for Best Novel in Translation. Two of the author's previous appearances in *Asimov's*, "Planck Zero" (January 1992) and "Hero" (January 1995), along with his current story, "Soliton Star," are also a part of this series. These stories will soon be reprinted in a British Xeelee collection, *Vacuum Diagrams*.

My dead wife has shown me the secret history of the Universe.

I hope she's wrong. Otherwise, in just a few million years, all humankind—all baryonic life—will be extinct in this Universe, destroyed by the dark matter cancer. And all our technology, all our ambition, all our faith, won't make a damn bit of difference in averting that fate.

I'll probably never know.

In the meantime, I care for her, as best I can. We go on. What else is there for us to do?

She came to me as I was preparing to leave for the Galactic halo, to investigate the Silver Ghosts' illegal quagma experiment.

I was alone, as usual.

I poured myself a malt. A Virtual malt. I can still ingest alcohol for real, of course, but I stick to the Virtuals. Now that I've lost the capability to drink, I've discovered that much of the pleasure of liquor comes from the tactile sensations Virtuals offer me: the heavy mass of the liquid in the base of the glass, the first rush of flavor . . .

Being injected just isn't the same.

I was resting up, at home.

Once we owned an apartment at the heart of the New Bronx. It was a nice place, light and roomy, with state-of-the-art Virtual walls.

Then Eve died.

Afterward, I spent too long in there.

Since my metamorphosis, I can't use the apartment anymore, of course, but I keep it anyhow, unoccupied. Unchanged, in fact, since Eve's

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death. I just like to know it's there. And I use it as a basis for the Virtual rooms I call home.

One wall melted.

Behind it, Eve was sitting on a couch like mine. She smiled at me, a Virtual within a Virtual.

My heart was pounding, somewhere, in a hollow metal chest cavity.

"You're wondering why I'm here," she said.

I sipped my drink. "Will you join me?"

She shook her head. She looked older than when she'd died. She pulled at a lock of hair, a habit she'd had since she was a child.

I said bluntly, "You're not Eve."

"In a sense, I am. Jack, I'm a better image than any you've seen before. Richer. Indistinguishable from—"

"No. *I* can distinguish. You're not Eve. If you were, you wouldn't even be here."

That was true. I'd been down this road before.

For years after her death, I continued to consult Eve—or at least, the best Virtual representation the apartment could come up with, based on her Notebooks and other records. Eve—Virtual-Eve—thought that was bad for me.

I'd decided she was right. Despite my loneliness after the metamorphosis, I hadn't called up Eve in seven, eight years. Therefore—

"You're not Eve." Even Virtual-Eve would have cared too much to do this to me.

She said, "You're going to the halo again. To the new Ghost installation there."

"Yes." I didn't expand. We'd had intelligence that the Ghosts were conducting fresh quagma experiments, in violation of our treaties. I presumed that whoever had sent this simulacrum knew that.

"And now their activities have been uncovered, the Ghosts won't proceed with the work," she said. "Unless *you*, Jack, give your approval, under the treaty."

"They better not," I growled.

"And will you allow it?"

"I don't know," I growled again. After what had happened last time. . . . "Probably not."

She said, "You must understand what the Ghosts are doing, out in the Galactic halo. And why you must allow them to proceed."

"Oh, must I? And you're here to persuade me, right? Who are you? Did the Ghosts send you?"

She stepped up to the surface of the Virtual wall that separated us. After a moment, I put down my drink and approached her.

Impossibly, she stepped out of the wall.

I could feel her warmth, the feather of her breath on my face.

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. . . But even as I stared at Eve, I was figuring how much processing power this Virtual must be demanding. This creature with me sure wasn't the cozy Virtual representation my apartment used to call up. *Could* this be some Ghost intrusion? If so, how were the Ghosts *doing* this?

She held out her hand. I reached out, and my fingers passed through her arm; her flesh, crumbling into cuboid pixels, had the texture of dead leaves.

"I'm sorry." She pushed back her hair. She reached out to me again.

This time, when her fingers settled in mine, they were soft; her hand was like a bird, living and responsive.

"Oh, Eve." I couldn't help myself.

"Jack, you must understand."

Behind her, the wall turned black, then filled up with frosted spider-web. It was a vision of the Universe, on the largest of scales: clusters and superclusters of galaxies, glowing softly, sprinkled over space in great filaments and sheets, separated by voids a hundred million light years across.

Eve's hand was still warm in mine. "You must watch," she told me, "and learn. It is a long story. The longest in the world . . ."

And she showed me the grisly history of the Universe.

I journeyed to the halo.

Galactic light glimmered over my chrome flesh. The core was a chandelier of pink-white light, thousands of light years across, hanging over my head. Spiral arms—cloudy, streaming—moved serenely above me. There were blisters of gas sprinkled along the arms, I saw, bubbles of swollen color.

Beneath my silvered feet there was only the distant, etiolated smudge of remote galaxies.

I looked at it all with new eyes. Could Eve be right?—were those shining stars already infected by photino birds?

The Silver Ghosts' experimental base was a hollowed-out moon, suspended here in the halo of the Galaxy. The moon hovered above me now, a fat, battered orange, made three-dimensional by the subtle shading of Galaxy-core light.

There was indeed quagma there, I saw: little packets of the primordial stuff of the Universe, buried in the pits of ancient planetesimal craters.

My information had been good, then.

But, right now, the installation looked static. Waiting.

A Silver Ghost came soaring up to meet me. It was a silvery, five-foot-wide sphere, complex patterns waving over its surface. I recognized it from its electromagnetic signature: contrary to myth, Ghosts aren't all alike. At least, not to another Ghost.

I greeted it. "Sink Ambassador."

The Ambassador to the Heat Sink floated before me, shimmering; I

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could see my own distorted reflection in its hide. "Jack Raoul. It has been many years—"

"More than a decade."

"It is pleasant to meet with you. Even if your journey has been a wasted one."

So it begins. The endless diplomatic dance. "Ambassador, it's clear—I can *see*—that you're running fresh quagma experiments, down there on that moon."

"You do not understand. In this circumstance, we have no need to justify our actions. You have no authority over our activities."

"Oh, yes, we do. By force of treaty, we have the right of inspection of any quagma-related project you run. You know that very well. Just as you have reciprocal rights over us."

The Sink Ambassador said, "This project transcends treaties. It is a new program, of great significance. Which we have every right to progress, unhindered—"

I pushed my sculptured face so close to its silvery hide I could see my own distorted reflection. "Sink Ambassador, we both know that is sophistry. You have proceeded with this work in a clandestine fashion—so you're aware of the force of the treaty—and you stopped when the work was discovered—so you want my approval; you fear our response. We're not going to let this go. We have to know what you're doing out here. After last time, if you break the treaty, we're quite prepared to use force."

The Ghost seemed to stiffen; I tried to read the thin tones of the translator chips. "Is this some formal declaration of—"

"Not at all," I said. "Our communications are secure. This is just you, and me, out here in the halo of the Galaxy. I simply want you to understand the whole picture, Sink Ambassador."

It rolled in Galaxy light. Who can read Ghost body language? Not me, even after all these years. But I suspected I had gotten through to it; maybe we could proceed on a new level of honesty.

"Jack Raoul, we should not bicker. Not in such a place. It is the dream of a million years, to be here and see this . . ."

I looked up at the core of the Galaxy. "Yes. Yes, it is. Sink Ambassador—why here?"

"There is much dark matter, here in the Galactic halo." Schematics scrolled across the Ghost's silvered hide. "*Dark matter*: the evidence is everywhere, even here. Our great star system rotates as one, as if solid; the stars are not in simple orbits around the center. This is because the Galaxy's visible matter is no more than a fraction of its total bulk. A vast, invisible halo of dark matter swathes the bright spiral, so that the light matter lies at the bottom of a deep gravity pit, turning—"

"—like an oil drop in a puddle," I said. "I know. So what?"

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The Ghost hovered in space for a long time, complex standing waves shimmering across its surface.

"We are here to change the destiny of the Universe, Jack Raoul."

Eve showed me how all matter, dark and light, erupted from the singularity at the beginning of time.

The dark matter clouds spread like some viscous liquid into every corner of the young Universe. Seething, they settled into a kind of equilibrium. Baryonic matter—light matter—was sprinkled like a froth over this sea.

Dark matter can't form stars.

When a clump of baryonic gas collapses under gravity, electromagnetic radiation carries away much of the heat produced, and the clump can collapse to a compact, stable body. A star.

But dark matter doesn't produce electromagnetic radiation. And without the cooling effect of radiation, a dark matter cloud, collapsing under gravity, traps much more of its heat of contraction. So large, diffuse clouds are the equilibrium form for dark matter. . . .

At first the young, cosmos-spanning ocean of dark matter was bland, featureless save only for variations in its smooth density.

Dead.

But the variations—mass concentrations on the order of millions of solar masses—formed gravitational wells into which fragments of light matter fell, pooled, self-gravitated, and began to coalesce. Gravitational warming began, and—finally, fitfully—the first baryonic stars sputtered to brightness.

A billion years after the singularity, the galaxies formed, trapped like flies in dark matter wrinkles.

Here and there, the material of the shining stars began to exert an influence on its dark counterpart. Photinos, dark matter particles, collected in the pinpoint gravity wells of the new stars.

Thanks to the baryonic stars, small-scale structure and high density entered the dark matter Universe.

A chemistry began.

Strange rains sleeted over the surfaces of the shadow worlds, buried in the blazing cores of baryon stars.

At last, life arose.

This was, I reflected, a typical Ghost project.

The Ghosts climbed to awareness on a planet orbiting a sun with a companion pulsar. The pulsar sprayed gusts of heavy particles across the sky six hundred times a second. Over a billion years that unending particle torching boiled away the main star's flesh.

When their atmosphere started snowing, the Ghosts rebuilt themselves.

That epochal ordeal left the Ghosts determined, secretive, often reck-

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less. Dangerous. They moved out into space—into the Heat Sink—to fulfill their ambitions.

Their projects were gigantic, grandiose. Foolhardy.

A decade before, we'd turned up evidence that the Ghosts were performing experiments with quagma, in violation of treaties between our races. I was made chief administrator of a Ghost liaison office. I was sent to see what they were doing. . . .

Here's how seriously we take the Ghosts: so that I could deal with them, we let the Ghosts remake me.

I look like a statue of a man, done in silver, or chrome. I don't live behind my eyes any more. I feel like a deep-sea fish, blind and almost immobile, stuck here in the dark of my chest cavity.

But my physical form doesn't matter much. In fact, lately I've come to wish the Ghosts had just rebuilt me as a sphere, as they are: simple, classical, efficient.

That lead on quagma experiments turned out to be accurate. The Ghosts had created a bubble universe, in which they'd adjusted the laws of physics to their liking.

They wanted to set up a Planck-Zero region, a volume in which Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle wouldn't apply. Because in such a region, it would be possible to construct, with finite resources, an AI of infinite power.

They succeeded, after a fashion.

The AI—sentient, isolated—was insane. It all but destroyed us. We managed to imprison it inside the event horizon of a black hole.

After that, human surveillance of Ghost quagma projects was stepped up.

We descended toward the Ghost base. The moon turned into a complex, machined landscape below me.

Ghost science platforms swept over pocked regolith. The ships were rough ovoids, woven from silvered rope, with instrument clusters and energy pods knotted to the walls. Silver Ghosts clung to the rope like grapes to a vine. All over the moon, vast cylindrical structures gleamed. These were intrasystem drives and hyperdrives, engines that had been used to haul this moon—at huge expense—out of the plane of the Galaxy, and to hold it here.

Here I was, suspended over another Ghost project. I wanted to retreat into the safe warmth of my own metal stomach.

The Sink Ambassador said, "Jack Raoul, we have discovered there are ways to generate compact, self-gravitating, soliton-like equilibrium states of bosonic fields. Soliton-like, in that nonlinear spacetime distortions balance dispersive effects. Here, in fact, we are seeking an oscillating solution, known as an oscillaton, which—"

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"Get to the point, Sink Ambassador."

It rolled in triumph. "We have found a way to construct soliton stars: stellar-mass objects, of dark matter. Such is the purpose of the experiment, conducted here. We will build dark matter stars—the first such objects, in all the Universe's long history. Think of that, Jack Raoul!"

I pondered that. It was a typically grandiose Ghost scheme.

I said, "But dark matter can't form stars. It has no coupling with electromagnetism."

The Sink Ambassador spun, exhilarated. "We are going to use another way to remove heat from a clump of dark matter: gravitational cooling . . ." More schematics scrolled across its surface.

I was shown a self-orbiting swarm of photinos. The swarm could eject its own faster-moving members, slingshotting them out like miniature spacecraft around shadowy planets. Because kinetic energy was equivalent to heat, the clump left behind would be cooler, more compact.

"The mechanism is similar to what you know as the Lynden-Bell analysis of the Jeans instability," the Ghost said. "The mechanism whereby a star cluster can settle to a compact, stable equilibrium by collisionless relaxation: ejecting its own faster-moving components to an outer halo. . . .

"You see how our quagma pods will impact in the core of this moon, in a complex manner. Their stores of superforce energy will be released in shaped pulses. The resulting gravitational waveforms will initiate the collapse of a photino cloud of approximately the mass of a small planet. Some 13 percent of the cloud's initial mass will be ejected during the violent relaxation process. The final soliton star will be just a few feet across, at the heart of this moon. A complex massive Klein-Gordon scalar field will be produced, with no self-interaction save through gravity, which . . ."

And so on. I fed all this into my Notebooks.

I thought about what Eve had told me.

In Eve's images, the dark matter creatures were like birds. Photino birds.

Flocks of photino birds fluttered through the fusing hearts of baryon stars as if they did not exist, with humans and other baryonic races all unaware.

Eons passed, with the two grand families of life, dark and light, oblivious of each other.

Then something happened.

Probably a supernova ripped apart a baryon star, laying waste to its host shadow world in the process. I imagined the horror of the photino beings as the irrelevant froth of baryons around them turned deadly, perhaps threatening the ultimate survival of their species.

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But without baryon stars and their tiny gravity wells, the densities required for the photino birds' life cycles would not be maintained.

It was a dilemma.

The photino birds needed stars. But they didn't need the damn things exploding all over the place. Cold, dull, and stable: that was how a star should be.

So the photino birds set out to transform the Universe.

I brooded over the Ghosts' experiment.

"It's going to take some close control," I said. "The crucial events will last no more than microseconds: that complex sequence of quagma collisions in the core . . . Ambassador, you must have one giant AI controller built into that moon."

It said nothing to that.

I thought of the stunning Virtual visions Eve had given me. I thought of Eve herself—of the feel of her warm hand in mine. Whether the Ghosts were controlling Eve or not, there was a lot of processing power around, all of a sudden. Where was it coming from?

I could only think of one place. A grain of suspicion lodged in my mind.

"Tell me why you're doing this, Sink Ambassador. If you make a soliton star—so what? What will you have achieved?"

"You know as much as we do, now, about the secret history of the Universe," it said. "The epochal conflict between light and dark matter, whose effects we have only begun to discern. Even now, photino creatures are clustered in the hearts of those hundred billion stars above us, choking them.

"And so, we are striving to generate another option. A better way."

I started to understand. "You think that if you can show the photino birds how to build star-sized objects of dark matter—without using the cores of baryonic stars—they will stop destroying our suns."

"That is the goal. The dream, if you will."

"And the great conflict can stop, and we can all coexist; we'll live together, photino birds and humans and Ghosts, like one huge family." I felt like laughing at it. "Lethe, Ambassador! At least you Ghosts can't be faulted for thinking big!"

"Now," it said, "you must understand why your approval of this project must be granted. We have no desire to violate treaties, to risk conflict with humanity. But on the success of this experiment, the future of the cosmos could hinge."

"Your arrogance is stunning."

My anger rose. I couldn't have gotten here any later, to have a chance of stopping this. Maybe the Ghosts had engineered the whole encounter, to force the issue like this—

The Ghost wheeled beneath the carved moon, absorbing data. "Jack

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Raoul, we are ready. The quagma containment is not stable; we need to proceed now, if at all. It seems," it said, "that the decision is yours."

I remembered Eve's images.

The photino birds settled into the hearts of stars and, by sipping heat from their cores, distorted the stars' physical processes, accelerating their evolution and ultimate extinction.

Even now—Eve says—photino birds have settled into the core of humanity's original Sun, in a flock the size of a moon.

With cool calculation the photino birds are making the stars old. . . .

"The birds are a plague, overwhelming, implacable. You must remember what you have seen, Jack. You must understand. You can see now why the Ghosts' project must go ahead. Can't you? Can't you, Jack. . . ?"

I turned to the Ghost. "Damn you to hell, Sink Ambassador."

"Your decision, Jack Raoul?"

"Do it."

Immediately, it began.

All around me, Ghosts rose up, clustering around their skeletal ships, and they sailed away from the deformed moon. The moon's intrasystem drive units were active now, I saw, working symmetrically around that battered surface, holding the moon in place.

And, down through the splayed-open hearts of ancient planetesimal craters, the quagma pods were already descending toward the core.

The Sink Ambassador looked excited, its shimmering hide taut. "The quagma droplets will soon meet, coalesce. And then the equilibrium oscillations will be induced."

I looked up at the engineered moon. There was a sense of mistiness about it now, as if a great liquid lens had gathered over that pulverized surface; the light of the Galaxy was refracted, shimmering and softened. I stared into the dark matter mist, hunting for structure.

"It is working," the Ghost said. "The quagma droplets are coalescing. Soon, the equilibrium oscillations will be induced."

A trickle of data started whispering in my head: interpolations and feedback from my datastores, from Eve's old Notebooks. Shadowy Virtuals glimmered around me: schematics of the moon, the photino star the Ghosts were building, little charts of growth rates, density-time fluctuations.

There was something odd. The projections of the soliton star's formation—based on human mathematics—didn't match up with what the Ghost had told me. . . .

And, huddled inside my metal belly, I grew preoccupied with hardening suspicions.

Suddenly—too late—I saw it.

"Lethe!" I said. "So there *is* a way out of a black hole."

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"Jack Raoul—"

"You let it *out*. The Planck-Zero AI. You released it!"

". . . Yes. It proved possible to accelerate the production of Hawking radiation, the natural evaporation of the black hole within which the AI was contained, which—"

"That AI was insane." I sought ways to express my anger. "Ambassador, I'm going to file a full report about this. I'm going to get human monitors placed permanently in every Ghost research establishment from now on." I was blustering. Terrified. Hell, I hate to be lied to. "If I'd known about the Planck-Zero AI, I'd never have granted approval for this. And—"

"It was necessary. The Planck-Zero AI is a powerful resource. Jack Raoul, we face cosmic obliteration. Surely the risk was justified. And as to the project, it is too advanced for . . ." It wheeled. "Something is wrong."

I was aware of agitation among the flock of watching Ghosts. They started withdrawing further from the moon.

An internal warning started to sound in my head. The Notebooks had come up with something they didn't like. More Virtual schematics, glaring primary-color warnings, filled up my vision.

The vents dug into the moon had started to glow, dull red. I saw molten rock bubble at the edge of one pit, its lip slumping into the cylindrical tunnel below. It was as if a fire burned in the moon's core; light poured out into space, illuminating the construction debris that clustered around the moon, and glimmering off the hides of the watching Ghosts, turning them to beads of fire. The Sink Ambassador twisted in alarm, its hide glowing red, chattering on many frequencies to its fellows.

In the moon's surrounding veil of dense photino mist, I saw shadowy shapes hurtle, agitated. Bird-like.

. . . And Eve was beside me again. This time she was Ghost-transformed as I was, her long-boned face easily recognizable under the chrome.

"It isn't stable. The soliton star. Is it, Eve?"

"No," she said dreamily. "Its density is too high. The density is stimulating photino decay. The free Klein-Gordon field the Ghosts want to create is collapsing. Imploding—"

Abruptly the Ghosts fled, including the Sink Ambassador, abandoning us; I saw their receding ships, shining threads against the intergalactic darkness.

The surface of the moon was almost entirely molten now. It was subsiding, collapsing inward.

"The Ghosts thought they were creating a home for the photino birds," I said. "But they were wrong. You *knew* that. You let them do it. They have made—"

"A bomb," she said. "A dark matter bomb."

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"It's you, isn't it? The Planck-Zero AI. Behind the mask of my wife. You wanted this to proceed. You came to me for your own reasons, to ensure that I didn't stop the experiment; the Ghosts didn't send you."

She turned to me and smiled. The glow of the metamorphosing moon reflected from her silvered eyes. I saw that she wore my ring on her finger. "I had to be sure of you, Jack."

I wondered why she had done this.

She had subverted the Ghosts' hubristic experiments—which were, maybe, genuinely aimed at a peaceful rapprochement with the photino birds. Perhaps she was trying to open up a war with the photino birds, to challenge them.

Or—

"This will destroy you," I said. "Whatever it is that sustains you, is in that moon." Maybe *that* was it. Release, from the terrible burden of *knowledge*. "Is that what you want?"

She pressed her face against my metallic chest.

I embraced Eve, enfolding her within my arms. Her skin felt warm, impossibly so. Human.

The thing at the heart of the moon turned white, dimming the sickly glow of the Galaxy's core.

The moon blew apart.

Molten rock, quivering droplets of it, showered up past us, battering my skin. I closed my mechanical eyes and huddled with Eve, waiting for the rocky storm to pass.

Eve—the Planck-Zero AI—wasn't totally destroyed. It proved possible to reconstruct some of it from the records and fragmented datastores left behind.

It is still sentient, but it is crippled. Its residual abilities are not much more than a human's.

I took it—her—home.

Now we spend most of our time in a Virtual of our old New Bronx apartment.

I guess I'll never know if Eve's bleak vision represents the true future history of our Universe. Perhaps that epochal conflict is just some mad fiction, concocted by her huge but damaged soul. Or perhaps it is only one strand of the truth; perhaps that gloomy future can, in the end, be averted.

But if she's right, in just a few million years, all humankind—all baryonic life—will be gone.

I guess if that's true, it's up to us to live as if it were *not* so.

I care for Eve, as best I can. We go on. What else is there for us to do? ●

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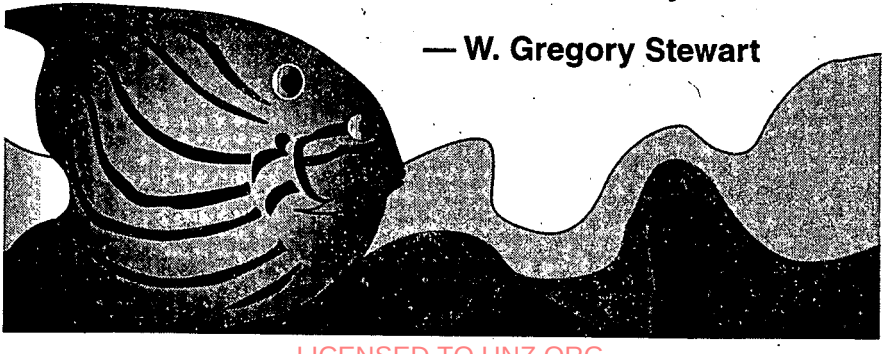
angel fishing

she drops a finest line
into the clotted waters
of the sky into
cloud and into
the drifting mist below

she waits
for the least and tiny tug
of something on the line
and pulls
to her from sleep
the souls
of dreamers risen
to her bait to slip these
from the hook and set
them free upon the sky

— W. Gregory Stewart



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Brian W. Aldiss

THE ENIGMA OF THE THREE MOONS

The brilliant author of these three mysterious short tales recently completed his memoirs, *Twinkling of an Eye*, and is at work on *White Mars*—a new science fiction novel. His latest collection of short stories, *Common Clay*, was published last September by St. Martin's Press.

Illustrations by Mike Aspengren

HIS SEVENTIETH HEAVEN

"Oh do, please do!" said the neophytes.

The neophytes were a lazy lot. Of the seven, four were young women, three young men. They spent fourteen hours a day in meditation, three in sportiveness and sexual horseplay, six in sleep, and one in ritual ablution. They lived in clean paper clothes and kept their toenails and hair short.

The name of the satellite was Gratitude One. It orbited Earth once every twenty-four hours, three thousand two hundred kilometers above the center of the Earth, turning idly as it went through its dance. For most of its days, Gratitude enjoyed continuous energy from the sun, a pebble caught in a living stream of light. None who lived on it paid taxes. It formed one of the most distant zeepees or zodiacal planets.

Three masters looked after the neophytes like blue-jowled mother-surrogates. All work was done by three androids, calm things with no savor to their presence. The living quarters and dormitories were sparsely furnished. Beds were made of mahogany. Apart from diamonds and nuclear energy, mahogany was the most expensive thing in the solar system.

In the Heaven Room, phototropic eyelids filmed across the long slits of windows when light was becoming too brilliant. Here were sounds of a terrestrial nature, bird song, whispers of wind, the splashing of a distant

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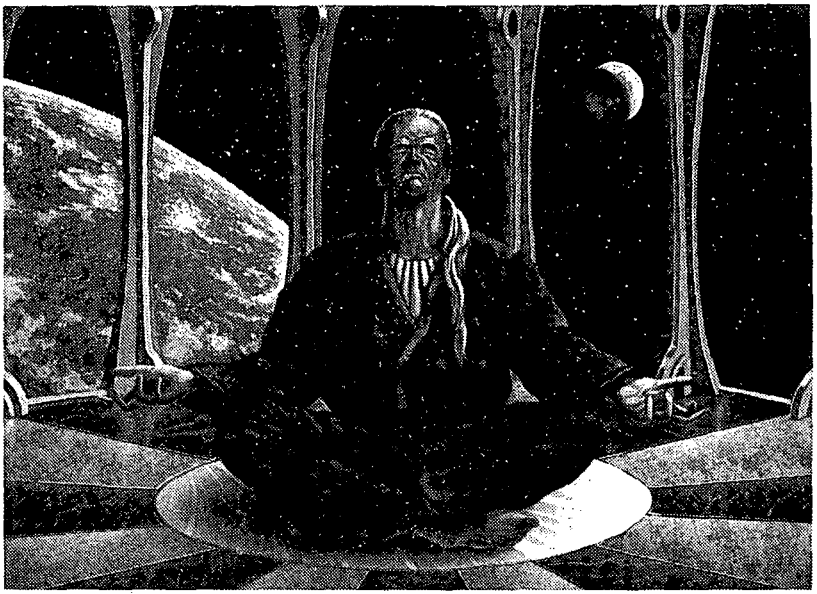

waterfall. Here, too, incense burned. The Heaven Room was where Ryan Son Moon worked.

Although terrestrial wealth fountained up to Ryan Son Moon as if drawn to goodness, he lived an ascetic life in his small private world. For himself, he needed nothing; no coin ever loitered in his cotton jersey trouser-pockets. His fortune went to maintaining Gratitude One and to funding the teaching of his neophytes and disciples.

The money came from those millions on Earth who bought Ryan Son Moon's Heavens™. (Sometimes they were called "Entrances™," emphasis balanced equally upon first and second syllable.)

Son Moon claimed not to be an intellectual. The variant of zen of which he was the originator did not require intellect. Nevertheless, Son Moon had EI: empathic intellect. He had EI enough to see that mankind needed salvation, deserved salvation, and could receive it best in small doses, like vitamin pills. It was Son Moon's mission in life to offer EI salvation to all, to provide relief from the tension under which most lives were lived.

His Heavens came from the inner recesses of his head. After years of silent search, alone in a deserted region of the Kuhusai Peninsula, Son Moon had experienced an awakening. He found a small doorway in his psyche which led to a direct experience of the universe. For a year and a sidereal day he was lost there. Through this doorway he coaxed the images of wisdom he termed Entrances or Heavens. They were recorded

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and despatched in kompacts by ferry to Earth. They could be bought and mind-played by anyone anywhere with a few dollars to spare. Having no language, the Heavens knew no language barriers.

The neophytes, four young women, three young men, stood before Son Moon and pleaded again. "Oh do, Master, please do!"

Although he knew what his response would be, he withheld it for a space: their toenails must be allowed to grow. Son Moon was in his late seventies, although he looked much younger. His father, an Irish American, came of mixed parentage, half-Irish, half-English; his mother was half-Chinese, half-Malaysian. He was a small stocky man with intense dark eyes, who still looked capable of embracing the globe. His hair, never cut, often trimmed, was tied with a leather strap and hung down his back. At his temples, the hair, remaining stubbornly black, curled up in small curls like the tails of a pair of naughty birds.

"I will see the proposed interviewer," he said to the neophytes, after the pause. "And we shall see if he can see me."

"He will see you," said one acolyte.

"He will see the popular image of me. Perhaps he will see further. We must see what we can see in him, and hope it will be good."

It was the first time in twenty years he had consented to give an interview. The man, he had said, was nothing: the idea was everything.

The neophytes clapped once. He said, "Fame only obscures truth, seeking to devour it."

They said nothing. They gazed down at their carnal pink gleaming toenails, reminders of ancestral Beasthood. Secretly, the neophytes longed for fame, while knowing it to be a scorching fire. Buried in each of them was a heritage of lumber they were looking to the disciplines of Gratitude One to eradicate. They still doubted themselves, although they had been reassured that visionaries were full of contradictions. They longed for fame: they sought obscurity.

For fourteen hours every day the neophytes sat in silence, breathing the breath of life. They lived vividly, becoming great. Every seventh day, they all got drunk. But not their leader, Ryan Son Moon.

The interviewer, a terrestrial celebrity by name Ronald Said Howards, came up on a large screen brought especially into the Heaven Room. Howards wore a white shirt. A bald no-nonsense man with large earlobes, accustomed to talking politics with presidents. Son Moon sat facing the screen in the lotus position, wearing his loose black garments, totally relaxed. His hair curled against his temples.

After a few preliminaries, in which Howards remarked that he usually spoke with politicians, he said that the interview would be watched by hundreds of millions of viewers on the planets. To this Son Moon made no reply. Howards asked Son Moon if he felt himself set apart by his unusual powers.

"I am apart only in terms of physical distance from you. My Heavens

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go into many minds; for them I am not apart but close. As close as thought can be. The EI discipline is not a unique talent. Many men and women have learnt it from me."

"You are set apart in the sense that you are an intellectual."

Son Moon said, "Although I am no intellectual, I understand what an intellectual is, I believe. An intellectual needs a powerful personality because he seeks to articulate unpleasant truths, and always to question. It is a lonely position. My distancing from Earth symbolizes a sympathy with that intellectual position.

"But I deal not in words. My Heavens are pictures. They are not like mass-art, with which Earth is swamped. Mass-art has become the tool of political forces. My Heavens are pictures untainted by commerce, private things, experienced, lived, in the mind. The mind is the one private place left in a politicized universe. You see what is happening on Mars. It too is becoming one more political battlefield."

Howards was smiling. "I was warned before this interview that you might speak cryptically. You speak very clearly. Is that the effect of EI?"

"You must beware of those who speak clearly, Mr. Howards. I would speak cryptically if I could. Life's no textbook. I do not talk well, because when I talk I say what has been said often before. Only my Heavens are of individual coinage."

He spoke almost casually. All his sexual energies were funneled into his present moments.

Howards nodded. "If we might speak of those Heavens of yours. They were very elaborate at first. Now they have become—shall we say, minimalist? How's that?"

"A process of refinement needs no explanation. The inessentials get whittled away as time goes by. In a world where individuals have increasingly little say in the forces that control their lives, private and public, they treasure the small things which speak of intimate and governable relationships."

"May we see one? Your sixty-ninth Heaven, said already to have sold two billion copies?"

"Heavens are a private matter. They are not designed for public transmission."

"You make money out of them."

"People value what they have paid for."

After some discussion, Son Moon relented and said the Heaven could be projected. Howards's face was replaced by a bread-board.

The board was of an old-fashioned English type, circular, made of scrubbed pine and turned on a lathe. The viewpoint pursued the letters floridly incised round a section of the circumference. A chubby B like a buxom imagined cook, red of face from her baking. An R with a curlicue to its tail, grand, as when it stood for Royal. An E with a fat middle stroke

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like a tongue in a square mouth, almost licking an A with a strut connecting its two near-verticals, holding them together as if they might slide apart. A D like a stomach full of dough, bulging with contentment.

On the board a loaf of bread was placed, a squareish loaf with biscuity sides and a domed crust, brown as the board beneath it. A woman's hand, unadorned by ring or nail polish, put it in place. In her other hand she held a knife with serrated teeth, gleaming. The hands were all that was to be seen of the woman. She placed the loaf centrally on the board. One corner of the loaf overlapped the buxom B.

With a leisurely sawing movement, the knife cut down through the bread, moving obliquely until it reached the board. The first crusty slice revealed its crumbling wholemeal texture as it fell flat on the board, to lie crumb uppermost.

The knife rose and slowly cut a second slice. This slice, lacking the strengthening end crust, bent slightly as it toppled to lie over the first one. The woman's hand laid the bread knife on the board, parallel with the remainder of the loaf.

During this simple procedure, there was ample time to examine everything, the action of the woman's wrist, the rough masculine texture of the revealed interior of the loaf.

"Your Heaven is rather static, isn't it?" said Howards, reappearing on the big screen.

Son Moon smiled. "You find yourself using politicized language, don't you? Those in favor of progress use the word 'static' pejoratively. My word is 'stationary.' . . . People are made happy by stationary things. They understand that genuine progress means an increase in understanding, not in the enrichment of those who manipulate governments and technical advance. The slicing of a loaf of bread, when properly felt, is a rewarding experience. Always. Eternally. Things are properly felt when we live in the present breath.

"A loaf already sliced is a politicized event, dangerous to moral health."

Howards said that he appreciated Son Moon's earlier, more elaborate Heavens, with more action to them. He remembered one Heaven in particular, in which a woman had gone for a long walk with an animal resembling a giant cat. He had forgotten what happened exactly, but it took place on the Moon. He hoped to see more colonists on the Moon. He was lost when the time parameters of the Heavens were stretched and the action diminished greatly, as in Number Sixty-Nine.

"You did not stay the course," said Son Moon, entirely without reproach. "Many millions of your fellow-planetarymen and women are staying. Just for enjoyment. Perhaps they also learn."

The viewpoint, ever restless, cut to the neophytes in their somber garments while the two men talked. Whatever the subject, the camera could not be allowed to remain still for as long as two minutes, for fear that the viewing

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audience would become bored and leave. The acolytes, aware of the lens upon them, tried to look at their most angelic, and instinctively chose immobility.

"And now you're into your seventieth heaven," said Howards, not without sarcasm. "How long is it going to take to construct?"

Son Moon said that Heaven was composed entirely of something beyond conscious thought. Since pure thought was an imperfect art, he might take many months over Number Seventy. Howards tried to tempt him to show what he had done. Son Moon said no. He spoke of other earlier Heavens: the old woman outside a deserted house slowly sweeping laburnum blossom from a terrace; a man learning to play the piano with his right hand, while his left rested easily on his knee; the hoe, turning over dry ground, held in a gnarled grasp.

"Your symbols for these 'entrances' are all rather of the past, aren't they?" Howards commented. "A *hoe*, I mean . . ." He gestured dismissively. "The ancient Greeks used *hoes*. . . ."

"Politicized language again, Mr. Howards. Not old-fashioned but universal. Even today, in the twenty-first century, more people use hoes than computers. You conveniently forget how poor most of the world is, and how much under stress its people live. The object of EI is to unfold in starved minds something with which most people are familiar, and to allow them to reinterpret it. They may eventually learn to reinterpret their own lives. But such reinterpretation is a sacred thing; if spoken of directly, it becomes politicized. . . ." After a long pause, Son Moon said, "It is urgent that we alter our lives: that's the way to happiness, to salvation. . . ."

"You claim," said Howards, pulling at an earlobe, "to offer the world salvation, no less. Salvation from what?"

"Oh, from itself, of course."

"Isn't that arrogant?"

"Mr. Howards, even humility can seem arrogant at times. . . . Yes, I will show you the few seconds of my seventieth heaven so far completed. Perhaps then you and your viewers may understand. . . . Well, let the vision speak without words."

The burly masters, the slim neophytes, looked dismayed. Here was their beloved Son Moon going against his own practice. They well knew the mental energy required to conjure even a moment of a Heaven. For this, they were permitted the run of the satellite: when necessary, they sat with their leader, breathing with him. The silent support of the group was as much of a requirement as the roar of a crowd at a football match.

The Seventieth Heaven™ began. A figure sat alone in a room. The figure was heavily garbed in white, its sex ambiguous under its baggy clothes. The room was bare. It consisted of a wooden floor, metal walls, and slit windows stretching from floor to ceiling, grouped in pairs. Beyond the windows lay mist. Sound had yet to develop.

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Son Moon sat in the lotus position, eyes all but closed. It took considerable powers of concentration just to maintain the room as an unalterable whole, furnished.

A green field appeared beyond the slit windows. The plain green became grass, fifteen inches high, awaiting cutting. One or two trees appeared in the distance, slowly taking shape as acacias, heavy with blossom. The figure in the chair did not look out of the window. Neither it nor anything else moved.

A fly was introduced into the bare room. Its presence was at first merely a dull buzz. Then it appeared, swooping and soaring, as if in enjoyment of its powers of flight. Viridian glints on its body proclaimed it to be a greenbottle. The detail became sharper all the while. Now the figure on the chair was revealed clearly as a woman of middle age; her hair grew, straggling over her white collar.

But something was interfering with the rhythmic buzz of the fly. The neophytes, sensing something wrong, opened their eyes and looked up. Son Moon sat immobile, wrestling with his construction. Furious bleating could be heard above the fly's song.

Somewhere, sheep were leaping. They plunged down from the maw of a rusting ship into scummy water. Down went the poor beasts. Some landed on other sheep already in the water. Some managed to scramble ashore, calling in terror. Some were too seriously injured to gain dry land. Still they poured from the ship, from the black mouth of a hold, beaten by sticks as they went.

"What is it?" Howards asked in some alarm, from his screen.

Ryan Son Moon rose to his feet, face pale. The three masters ran to him. The neophytes summoned an android. The frightened sheep, the bare room, the woman encased in white—all disappeared in a flash.

Without anger, Son Moon said, "The interview has been tampered with. We discussed beforehand whether this might happen. Your government is jamming us. I shall have to say farewell, Mr. Howards. Goodbye."

"I'm sorry—" began Howards, but he was shrinking as he spoke. He dwindled to a dot and disappeared.

Explanations were not considered a proper mode of education on Gratitude One. Learning had to be by interpretation and inference. It was right that what was difficult should have its difficulty accepted and understood.

But Son Moon was a considerate man. To allay the consternation of his followers he said, "Do not fear. I borrowed the sheep imagery from Ronald Said Howards. It needed only a little extra concentration. He is one of the intellectuals who runs with the pack. He will never speak out, he goes with the status quo. What we saw was how he thinks of the common people."

One neophyte ventured to ask a question. "But will the common people understand?"

He spoke directly from the EI creed. He said, "In time they will . . ."

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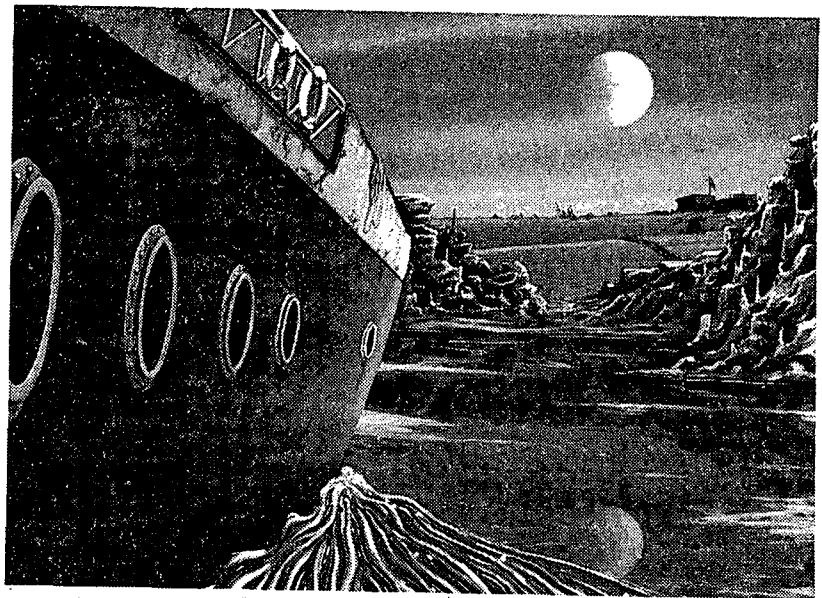

ON THE INLAND SEA

They were taking Mike Moone across the inland sea to have him properly, legally, shot. In Gratitude, they beamed Moone consolation. The cargo ship made an unsteady five knots. Its obsolescent steering malfunctioned; it was constipated, creaking along like an old bowel moving toilet-wards. The sea itself, flat as a chapati, gave no movement that first day out from shore. Even at night when the moon Moone may have been called after, too obese to rise to zenith, cheesy in the western sky, shone along the water, there was to the sailing nothing magical. The thanatognomonic seascape defied fancy.

Not that Moone saw much of his surroundings, as he stared through his porthole. Moone had never seen much of anything in his life. Since childhood, maybe before that, he had blindly done whatever had to be done. He served. Though he never grew adept at serving, lackeydom was his habit, his way of life. In the end, he had come to serve the wrong master. When shouting hordes ran down the dusty street, when the knives and staves were out, when a noonday madness prevailed, when men screamed like women for blood—when his master's house was about to fall to revenge and sheer human shittiness, the master's other servants and thugs had scrammed through the back door for safety. Left it hanging open, too.

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Only Moone had stayed behind in the shuttered room full of electronic clutter and the smell of fear radiating from the governor. Bars of light full of dust and sweat slanted through the jalousies. For some reason he was unafraid, able to—unable not to—withdraw into an inner life. There was the greenbottle, all viridian glints, and an old man in the lotus position: the grass awaiting reaping. Stillness, the surface of the pool of the soul undisturbed.

He had experienced these things elsewhere.

Awareness sank or lifted. He communed mysteriously with ancient personages who understood nothing of death—why did he know them so well when he had never met them?—these figures who had dreamed themselves into being long before the first men had ever looked into looking glasses and recognized themselves. A somatic world breathed with no language but laughter and silence. Handclasps. Acceptance—something he had never known—exfoliated from the beings . . . who were also himself.

So Moone—momentarily immune Moone—was in an existential antipodes where all screaming and bloodlust were switched off. Momentarily he was at ancient gates with an admired woman, a fabled legendary female, who spoke of the burial of the dead, by which he understood her to mean himself.

In a sense it was all terrible, almost beyond mere happiness, like all visionary experiences, because beyond rational cognizance. This was cognizance itself. All knots were untied.

In the old green blind world, garlanded archetypes—was that admired woman still present?—offered him nourishments like slices of bread that he was able to transact into precepts:

The essentials of life cannot be told, only found
There is a Self beyond all injury
You see only by shadow: reason is God's shadow when His back is turned
The cause of sin and pain is the ambition for individual life

These were slices carved from a board he knew, that circular board of wood. The hand, the knife, the curious lettering, the crumb. . . The bare, he understood, the bare facts of existence.

And with that realization, he was painfully back where the governor was yellow with fright and the mob came closer. Back also to all the ugliness of himself, his body and the perpetual anger. The vision had come and gone in a timeless instance. From motives obscure to himself at the time and since, Moone climbed up on a wicker armchair when the killers broke in, shouting to them to come and get him. It was, he supposed, destiny.

The mob had dragged the governor down the street to the old temple (once cinema, once courthouse, once brothel, once store, now police station), killing him every inch of the way. A kick, a punch, a stab, a poke in the eye . . . Politics had changed since the previous day; so had religion; so

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had the leaders in a distant capital; it even appeared that the governor was suddenly one of the wrong tribe. The human spirit was blowing like an idle wind, like a tattered shirt out to dry on a wire line, like a buggered-up weather vane. So they hacked him to bits on the police station steps.

Moone was not important. They saved Moone for propaganda purposes. For Moone, there was to be justice of a kind, a justice more cruel than assassination: a cell, a voyage across the inland sea, a mock-trial. Moone was to be shot legally before witnesses in a courtyard behind a two-story building flying a flag, not far from the quayside. That was democracy in action.

He lay awake by night, listening to the laboring of the ship's engines across the flat and shallow brine. Sometimes he prayed. Having no god, he invented one, dimly remembering forms of prayer taught him on the lap of a dimly remembered mother. Of course he would die, whether he prayed or not. His mother had died. There was yet another tragic botch in the universe: mothers died. So you began the struggle to exist at the age of five, selling discarded boxes or sucking cock or doing whatever sustained life.

By day he slept, sweating into the stinking bunk, listening to the plonk of the engines. Sleep was never real sleep. Sleep kept crumbling like a sand cliff, revealing fossils of past days, hideous things with broken jaws. He woke choking and struggling against apnea in the clotted air of his marine prison.

First light of dawn showed the inland sea to be a spread of moldering porridge.

Food was brought early, as the sun rose, generally a plate of beans and rice. A can of water, the can rusted, the water polluted but having to last all the hot, weary, labyrinthine, fumbling, creeping day. Sheep were penned in a hold next to Moone's cabin. He smelt them and their ordure. From their shaky bleats he constructed words, fragments of sentences, abuse.

He was secured to the bunk by one leg. The metal chafed his ankle. His skin rotted, peeling away into sores like blotches on a rotting apple. Though he covered the leg with his filthy piece of blanket, flies crawled under the blanket for a taste.

The inland sea was no longer the expanse it had been. Rivers which once flowed into it, keeping it pure, had been diverted into canals constructed to water cotton fields carved out of desert. With the hydrological cycle of precipitation and evaporation destroyed, the sea was shrinking irreversibly, like an old man's withered hand closing in death.

All of the region round the inland sea was blighted by salty neuroleptic storms and dusts. Diseases long forgotten by the civilized world rose again from the decaying ground. The sea itself no longer harbored fish: its salinity was sufficient to dissolve living cells. A crust had formed over the face of the waters. Giant saprophagous spiders rushed out from the laboring ship, to snatch at titbits only they found edible.

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The ship's twin propellers kept up their pounding. In three days the vessel was almost across the dwindling tideless waste.

Moone gazed from the porthole at his destination. The water gave place to a shelving bank of pure poisonous chemical, dazzling white in contrast to the grey blanket of sea. Carcasses of boats were beached there, rusting, falling apart, deserted by tides, hollowed by decay. Far up from what was now the shore stood a collection of low buildings. In better times, they had been a fishing port. Wiping his eyes with his blanket, Moone made out a distant quay against which blue inland waters once lapped. Stains marked their passage. The light against his eyeballs was as abrasive as sand particles.

A long trail of planking and metal lattice stretched from the present sea margin up the poisoned beach to the stranded port. He realized he would soon be walking up that planking, toward the courtyard behind the building with the flag.

Two guards entered the cabin and unshackled Moone's leg. Trying to stand, he fell over and was hauled to his feet. They struck him with their rifles to encourage him.

He emerged on deck. A hot stinking wind crisped his cheeks. He coughed and spat.

The guards propelled him to the rail. A rowing-boat had been lowered to the starboard side of the ship. An armed man, half-naked, stood in the boat, readying his sub-machine gun as Moone was forced to climb down to him.

Harsh cries of men and animals. Sheep were bullied, struck, cursed to leap into the sordid shallows. Some fell on others, maiming them. With cries of terror the creatures struggled to the shore, to be bullied, struck, cursed, toward some distant slaughterhouse.

Misapplied technology had reduced this corpse of a world to pre-industrial simplicity: food, work, oppression, death. Sun overhead.

There were no surprises. Moone had never found any real surprises in life; everything was ruled by inflexible destiny, tempered only by illusions of free will. After the boat had been rowed to the shore, he was forced at gunpoint to jump into the gungey water and gain the boardwalk.

A guard held one of his arms as they proceeded inland, in case Moone should know of somewhere to run to. There was probably no other habitation within a hundred miles. The fisher families who once enjoyed a living from the inland sea had long disappeared or found work in a distant factory. The skeletons of their fleet, the debris of their retreat inland, lay scattered everywhere in a final aleatory defilement of nature.

Moone trudged up the rotten planking, past these sublunar relics of better times toward the distant buildings. He could already make out the flag flying over the two-story building far ahead. It would require at least twenty minutes, he reckoned, to get there, taking the distance step by step, slice by slice, as he had taken life.

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ROSE IN THE EVENING

Samsara, the great wheel, turned, though the season appeared without motion . . .

A few twitchers were heading back toward Omnurbs, camercasqs still clamped over their heads. They rode dynorods, moving just above the ground at the statutory seven kilometers an hour. They were heading one way, Myrtoo and Rose another. They kept looking at the time. Rose kept looking ahead, her childishly absorbed face set to the south.

Myrtoo thrust inquisitively forward, ignoring the comments of the rodders, pausing only when it was time to turn off the well-defined lane they walked. Long before Myrtoo was incubated, the lane had been an eight-lane highway; now the only traffic was on foot or rod.

"Do we turn off here, Rose?" Myrtoo asked. Rose Moon switched on the orthogonal compmap in her helmet and read off the coordinates. It was confirmed. She punched to semi-gravity and dived after Myrtoo into the thick undergrowth.

They were pushing through beechwood, checking, checking, buzzing coordinates back to base office in Omnurbs. When they reached a clear-

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ing, the mountainous flanks of the Kramer city could still be seen to the north. Story rose majestically above story for over ninety kilometers; the upper plateaux of the linear metropolis were bathed in evening sunshine, glittering like crystal.

As usual, Myrtoo went ahead, her progress happening in short bursts. Rose followed at a steadier pace. A last male twitcher emerged from the undergrowth, carrying his rod over one shoulder. He gave Rose an amorous look. She returned him a well-practiced cat-hiss through wide-open mouth. He shook his head resignedly and passed on. One day he hoped for a hybrid of his own.

She caught his thought as it faded, a small-radius Class 6 thought. "You gotta earn merit to own a hybrid," she shouted at his back, guessing he would not possess a thoughtnapper.

She closed down the poisons of loneliness: only with Myrtoo had she been able to establish a relationship.

Progress was steady southward. The pair of them traveled uphill and down. This area was pocked with irregular pits, all that remained of quarries from which stone had been excavated to build the linear cities running like slender mountain chains across the face of the globe. Beyond the palisades of the linked cities were wildernesses. The quarries were long since grown over by ash, elder, beech, and such shrubs as euphorbias and mesembryanthemums. Deer scattered giggling at Myrtoo's soft approach. "Catface!" they called—a color more than a call.

The evening was protracted into a celebration of the funeral of light. The sun lingered like a young man at a gate. The towers of Omnurbs remained pink as if what housed millions was merely a nuptial cake.

Rose took each step forward as it came. She was attentive but carefree, planting sheathed feet. She counted every inhalation of precious air, aware she had only so many billion lungfulls to relish in her lifetime. Every pace, over gravel, over sward, over bare crater rock, was consciously taken. She always made one lungful of air last 4.5 minutes. This was happiness: to be on the move, on the quest for a kill. To have a motive, however imposed.

"Here's a burrow, Rose," called Myrtoo. Myrtoo had paused on a fern-covered hillock, looking back over one furry shoulder with her usual smouldering patience. "Come on, dear! This is it. This way." Thick furry bass/soprano bounces of thought.

Catching up with her companion, Rose parted sheltering fronds of fern and peered behind them. She inhaled and clicked the analyzer. Sure enough, this was an entrance to an LTSZ road: the electronic nose told her so.

As they climbed down, a flash lit them. "They have us fixed and watched, Myrtoo," Rose thought at her companion. "Take a little care."

Without looking over her shoulder, Myrtoo radiated a smile back. They

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entered the dark of the road. Myrtoo's excellent nocturnal vision would see them through the difficult stretches.

Rose too had some night vision, but she caught hold of Myrtoo's tail to be safely guided. Some of the LTSZ roads were rough in places. The tunnel branched. The way came nearer the surface. It became a trench, and little wider than a trench, with frequent passing places. Some of the Outsiders they encountered were human. Many side roads curved away across the unending wilderness. Nowhere was there a signpost: only a caged bird at intervals, twittering a signal for those among the Outsiders who could comprehend.

For many a mile, the trench was sheltered by overhanging trees, by climbing plants that sprawled down the sides of the LTSZ roads. Deeroids could be seen, munching them tidy. Every now and again from an underground village came the music of Billy J. Kramer and the Dakotas. The immortal sounds had traveled halfway across the galaxy.

Rose and Myrtoo were happy. Every step was a kind of miniature joy; their brains had been creamed up with the Joy Hormone.

Their way was through an illusory labyrinth of light and shadow, ever checkered: in life as in the roads.

They slept in one of the sub-soil villages. The charge for a bed was minimal. Rose and Myrtoo lay in each other's embrace, wrapped in the comfort of semi-gravity. Although they were enemies to the people here, the Outsiders, they were unlikely to suffer harm. The low tesosterone/serotonin zero levels after which the roads were named guaranteed a minimum of aggression. Outsiders were rarely able to defend themselves, while attacking others was almost out of the question.

Regulated civilized life continued inside the enormous lateral cities. Everything needful for life was produced there. Agriculture, in the old sense, had become obsolete: food came from faketories. Of course, there were some eccentrics who refused city life, its ease, its comfortable claustrophobia, its cradle-to-grave protection. A venturesome few still rodded a short way beyond the walls on day-passes; these twitchers were allowed to carry nothing more lethal than a camercasq. But the true eccentrics, the refusniks—they were Outsiders, who won their banishment by undergoing the T/S operation. It was a peaceful world. Slow. Autumnal. Peaceful.

Religious schism had almost ruined omnurban life. Northerners and Southerns had argued theological points almost to the brink of civil war. Which had been the True Dakota? It was a *casus belli*. Such arguments meant little to the aloof Rose.

4.5 minutes. Another breath . . . Existence was nothing but the breath of life. The unspoken was real enough.

Killer Police were needed for special missions. Rose Moon and Myrtoo formed a Killer squad. They were contracted to take out Sycoran Jamess.

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For this, they traveled far from Omnurbs. An hour's Category A thought-rest and they were up and on their journey south again, the lovely creature leading as before, head high, tail high.

Deeper into the wilderness, the wildwood, here impenetrable except to feral beasts and the strains of "Listen, Do You Want to Know a Secret?" Semi-thoughts of barking deer and hog and badger, steeped in a grassy perfume, came to Rose: "No, no, wrong, no rhythm, no stepping with the right sinews." "Um, the highness of that head, its smallness, its highness and smallness, um, very highness and smallness." "Where's from, where's to? Not needed. Only at. At is everything, everywhere. At, at, think that."

But the words came to Rose as tastes, which served to feed her mystic anorexia.

Rose closed down that flavor-lid. In her brainmaze she felt many lids. Convenient to keep them closed. Whatever was inside there was something less than the eternal external world. She had been trained. The efficient purity of Myrtoo's mind calmed hers: more efficient than her own, she acknowledged.

All through the long lethargic evening they moved, passing many a dull village. Passing singers and occasionally those who danced or jigged or did the kramer. Not so much as a turd was thrown at them. The semi-gravity effect kept them part-invisible.

After two more sleeps, they came on villages built half-above ground. The villagers considered themselves far enough away from Omnurbs for safety. Unmanned fliers were occasionally launched from the metropolis to spray the Outsiders. Agent Indigo kept libidos down.

In the thick flowery bush, "Little Children" played, subtly woven distortions and harmonics lending complexity. They were nearing the place where Sycoran Jamess lived and worked. Her music. Near the target, Myrtoo hung back, letting Rose go forward. Myrtoo knew and remembered every step they took, but was stronger on cognizance than bravery.

Of course Sycoran had to be wiped. She composed new things. True, they were composed from the old. Everything was composed from the old. New lives were composed from old. Rose Moon and the Moon were composed from the old. All new thoughts were composed from old. New breaths from old. Old things from older. Time itself from a material older, stiffer.

Sycoran's new melodies were a threat to Omnurbs, to its stability. The rulers of the linear city were no fools; they knew the penetrative power of music. Their very foundations were not proof against the right song at the right time. They needed Rose Moon to kill Sycoran Jamess.

The house of Sycoran was improvised from wood. It resonated with her music. She lived there with ten beautiful black shints. All were making

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music. About the room fluttered yellow and black macaws with basalt eyes and stone age beaks. All, all bar Sycoran, disappeared when Rose mounted the rickety stair and appeared in the attic with her gun leveled.

Of Sycoran it had been said in the city that she was the ugliest of fiends. Yet behind her great prowed nose her proud bony face held resonant beauty. Her eyes glowed like smalts. When her lips drew back in a welcoming smile, her teeth were perfect. Her hair, long and unbound, framed her head. "Rose!" she said. The thought-name formed in the air between them, blossoming, delicate of tendril.

The wave she projected was unclassifiable. Rose Moon had experienced nothing like it for strength or seductiveness. But she recognized pure soul when she met it. She fell to her knees. Before her knees hit the planking, she was desperately in love with Sycoran.

All the trapdoors in her mind opened. She who was blind now could see. The great cat crawled between her legs, purring.

The Joy Hormone dried, to be replaced with the cream of something less synthetic.

She threw off her helmet first.

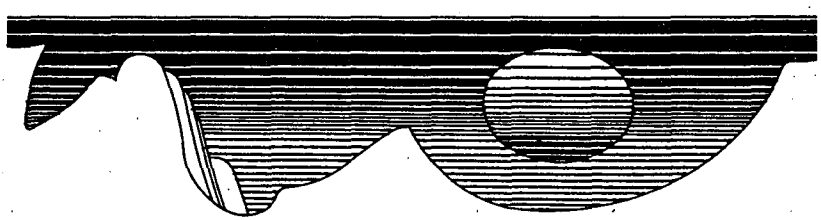
The shints, returning, played a mutated orchestral, "I'll Keep You Satisfied." Rejoicing was all. One cypher saved! One more chance for individuation, for integration. One more soul in continuous creation.

Rose opened the rosebud of her confession in the evening, "I never knew I was not alive till now."

Sycoran's full bright efflorescence of thought said, "It's important not to fear death." The admonition and its elaboration built in collaboration between them. "Samsara in Buddhist thought is the great wheel of life and death. Understand that divine continuity and there is no fear worth fearing, my beautiful one. Eat of the fruit while it is fresh, be satisfied."

The taste of it was lingering in their minds, their bodies, their eyes. Evening too lingered. Rose and Sycoran stood with Myrtoo, gazing from the attic window. Myrtoo ventured out on the wooden tiles. Low in the deepening sky hung the peerless blue-and-white-china globe of Earth.

The great wheel turned and still it was not dark. ●



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Cynthia Ward

ON THE LAST DAY OF SCHOOL

Former Air Force brat Cynthia Ward was born in Oklahoma and raised in Maine, Spain, and Germany. Now living with her husband in the Seattle area, Ms. Ward's publications include stories in *Sword & Sorceress 11; Galaxy; Tapestries,* a *Magic the Gathering* anthology; *The Ultimate Dragon;* and *Monster Brigade.* "On the Last Day of School" is her first tale for *Asimov's.*

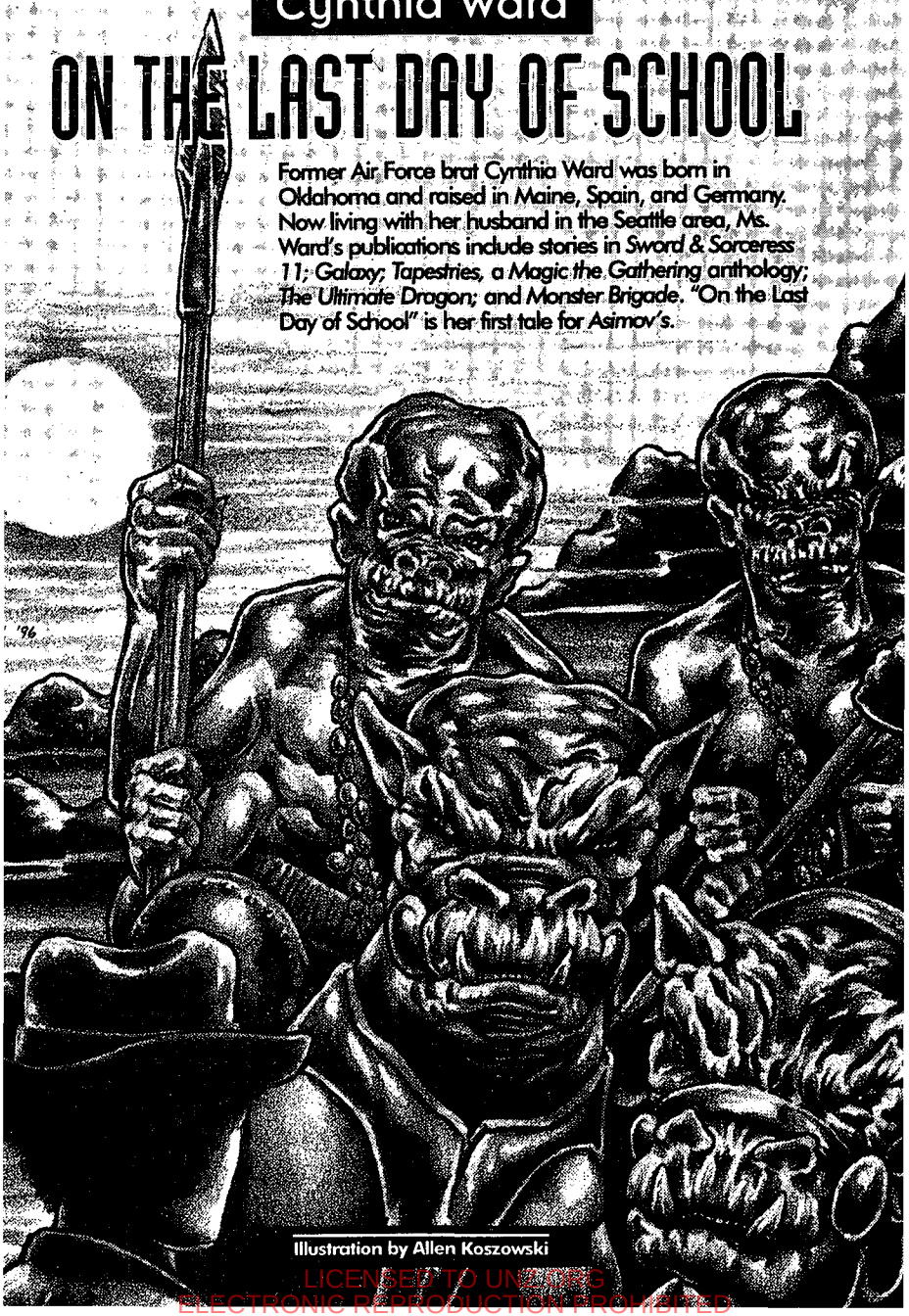

Illustration by Allen Koszowski

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Like honey, the golden noon light of Lambda Aurigae poured into the cleft of a small valley. A horse and rider entered the valley from the west. The dirt road curved around a gentle hillside, revealing a small neat ranch. The rider halted his horse. He raised a sun-darkened hand and wiped his mouth several times, scrubbing away the half-dried blood below his nose.

Mike Stein-Carver was thirteen years old, fourteen in Old-Earth years, and tall and rangy with rapid growth. He was dressed like a cowboy, though he had never seen a cow except in videos. Dust streaked his face and his denim jacket and trousers; sweat trickled from the shadow of his grey stetson.

Mike looked upon the ranch, but he saw a tall, sturdy girl with dark, alert eyes and a long black braid. Her complexion was as richly dark as moonless night. She smiled at him, and began unbuttoning her shirt.

Mike started, sitting up straight in his saddle. He shook his head violently, dispelling the unwelcome vision.

His abrupt movements caused his knees to nudge the horse's sides; the roan gelding broke into a trot, moving eagerly toward the ranch.

On the hillside south of the dusty road, flop-eared Nubian goats grazed on dry Old-Earth grass and scattered green shoots of the broad-bladed native grass. North of the road, the Stein-Carver horses were at pasture, all save a dapple-grey mare. She stayed near the barn, pacing and tossing her head.

Outside the electric fence, a stocky man and a small boy stood watching the restless horse. The man, Vance Stein-Gordon, was talking into a small phone, his white stetson tipped back. Mike smiled to see his eight-year-old brother Sam imitating the man's boots-apart stance. Vance Stein-Gordon was considered the finest rancher in the eastern hills, and Mike hoped to be half as good as his father some day, though of course he wouldn't inherit this ranch; it would go to Jenny, the first-born. Mike would homestead an empty valley, as his parents had done. As the younger sons and daughters of the ranchers had always done, from the days of the First Generation.

A voice came from behind him: "Michael."

Mike rubbed his mouth to remove any remaining trace of blood. Then he dismounted and turned around. "Hi, Mom."

Joan Devereaux-Carver was short, plump, and curly haired, with a face as broad and placid as stone. She smiled and stepped off the porch, approaching her son. "Free at last," she said.

"Yeah," Mike said. Today was the last day of school until the end of fall harvest. He should be overjoyed. Instead, he felt vaguely disappointed. He would have little opportunity to go to Unity, the human colony, during the next three months.

The grey mare snorted. She stopped her pacing, and rubbed her but-

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tocks on the edge of the barn door. Mike realized he would be sent to the seed bank, which had been stocked back on Old Earth to insure genetic diversity.

Mike smiled. He was going to Unity.

Vance turned, still talking into his phone, and gestured for Mike to approach. Mike's smile faded, and he pulled his hat down low to shade his face as he stepped up beside his father.

Vance hung the phone on his belt. "Mike, take the mare over to the Gupta-Skluzacek ranch to breed with the appaloosa."

Mike's eyes widened. He didn't want anything to do with mating horses. It was bad enough breeding the goats. The Stein-Carver horses were *always* artificially inseminated! He should be going to Unity.

Vance said, "Did you hear me, boy?"

"Yes, sir," Mike said. He didn't want to go to Unity. He didn't like town or townies any better than his father did. "Can I take the mare over after lunch?"

"Yes," Vance said.

Mike nodded.

Vance grabbed Mike's chin in his blunt fingers. He rarely touched his children. Mike stood tensely still, awaiting his father's anger.

"You've got a black eye," Vance said. "Goddammit, you know I don't want my kids to fight!"

"Yes, sir." Mike wanted to look away from Vance's glare. He hated to disappoint his father. "I'm sorry."

"Vance," said Joan, "our children don't often fight. And it's not as if you never do—"

"You didn't start it, did you?" Vance demanded, his fingers tightening on Mike's jaw.

"No!" said Sam.

Mike flicked a startled glance at his brother. He'd thought his younger siblings were on the bus when the fight started.

"Griff hit Mike first!" Sam said. "Griffin Lewis-Finau is a *pig*fucker!"

"Sam!" Joan said. "You know we don't use such language."

"But *Mike* called Griff a pigfucker!" Sam protested.

"It's an accurate description of Griff's father," Vance said. "Man spends all his time at the alien whorehouses—"

"Vance," Joan said warningly.

Vance turned back to Mike. "Why did you call Griff—" He broke off with a laugh, startling Mike. "My God," he cried, "Mike's gotten a beard when I wasn't looking!" His callused thumb rubbed the line of Mike's jaw, which bore a few soft hairs. "Joan, it looks like it's time to bring our young stallion in for his birth-control implant!"

Mike flushed with mortification.

"*Vance!*" Joan said.

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Vance let go of Mike's chin. "All right, boy. Why were you calling Griff names?"

Sam said, "Griff was making fun of Mike's girlfriend!"

Mike's flush darkened as Sam's words sparked anger. "I don't have a girlfriend!"

Vance grinned at his oldest son. "Who is she?"

"Nobody!" Mike cried. He heard Griff's taunting voice: *Mike's in love with a townie!* Griff wouldn't retract the words, only repeated them as Mike grew angrier.

Sam echoed them: "Mike's in love with a townie!"

"You lying brat!"

"Mike! Sam!" Joan said. "Stop it!"

"A *townie?*" Vance said. "Mike, what the hell are you doing chasing a goddam townie? Stick to your own kind."

"I'm not chasing *any*body!"

The mare in the corral whinnied, a bugle-blast that set Mike's ears to ringing. Despite that, he heard his brother chanting, "Mike's in love with Isabel Okafo-Hoffmann!"

"Okafo!" Vance seized Mike's arm. "A *black* girl?"

"Yeah," Sam said in a puzzled voice.

"I don't have a girlfriend!" Mike yelled. "Why can't you guys leave me *alone?*" He jerked his arm from his father's grasp.

"What the hell!" Vance shouted in astonishment.

Mike leapt into the saddle and kicked his horse to a gallop.

Vance yelled, "Come back here!"

Mike always obeyed his father. But this time, he did not come back.

He kicked his mount again, though it was already running flat out. He didn't have a girlfriend. He barely knew Isabel, he didn't want to know her, he'd never even talked to her; but he couldn't stop thinking about her. Isabel Okafo-Hoffmann. A townie girl. A townie! It didn't make any sense.

The eastern mouth of Stein-Carver Valley appeared to be blocked by a great copper disk; the second moonrise of the day. The red moon retreated before Mike, and he rode onto the Eastern Plains. He'd hunted on the Plains many times with his father and other ranchers, but he'd never been this far east alone.

Seeing a solitary line of trees about a mile to the northeast, Mike turned his horse. The trees had multiple rust-red trunks and small pale leaves and perfectly flat tops, as if the branches had struck a glass ceiling and spread out. Black-winged buff birds rose from the branches, croaking harshly, and flapped away. The horse whickered. Mike slowed his mount, and heard the faint trickle of water. The horse lowered its muzzle to a stream rising from the ground. Mike jumped out of the saddle and thrust his face into the spring.

Mike raised his head, water dripping from chin and stetson brim. His

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face was cooled, but not his anger. He remembered his father had ordered him to take the grey mare to be bred. He wrapped his arms around his knees. He wasn't going to do it.

Day turned to dusk as the grey moonlet Stanislaus eclipsed the sun. Isabel lay beside him, naked. She reached to touch him. He leaped to his feet, infuriated. He didn't want to think about her. He *wouldn't*. He wasn't an animal, trapped like the mare in genetically programmed behavior. He wasn't a Shahash, enslaved by pheromones.

Thank God he wasn't a Shahash! The *rathu* pheromone turned the aliens into rutting goats. In exobiology class, Mike had seen a video of mating aliens. It had been disgusting.

The first scientific team to study the Shahashee, the six-limbed, three-sexed natives of Lambda Aurigae III, had discovered that the Shahash "female" gave off a strong, musky scent in estrus—a pheromone that had affected the scientists, inciting numerous affairs and destroying several marriages. Mike shook his head. The scientists must have been real weaklings.

None of the scientists had had sex with a Shahash. No surprise; the aliens were so ugly, most humans called them "pigs." But it hadn't been long before the colony had a house where people could go to have sex with the rathunee, the alien "females." People like Griffin's father. Pigfuckers. Anyone who'd pay to have sex with an alien because it smelled good was beneath contempt.

The twilight of eclipse faded. As the sunlight strengthened, the midday heat seemed to intensify. In the shade, Mike tended to his horse, looping the reins around a branch and taking the bit from its mouth. The gelding lowered its head and nibbled at the short native grass. It snorted in disgust.

Mike remembered he was alone and unarmed on the Eastern Plains. The Plains were Shahash territory, and populated also by many species of wild animal. The animals usually avoided humans as they avoided the Shahashee, but a beast maddened by hunger or the rut would attack.

Mike turned in a swift circle, studying his surroundings. To the west were the hills he had left behind; to the north and south, grassland stretched to remote flat horizons. In the east were the heat-blurred blue peaks of a mountain range over four hundred miles away. Save for a far-off herd of native animals, probably kwell, Mike saw no movement. Even the broad blades of native grass were still in the calm of midday.

Mike glanced up. The moonlet Stanislaus had moved away from Lambda Aurigae. If the *Auriga Ark* were in the sky, streaking through its century-old orbit, Mike could not see it; the empty starship was only visible at night, a restless star. The white moon Zhou was half-hidden by the western hills; the copper moon Okafo stood above the eastern mountains. The moons of Lambda Aurigae III were named for the three pilots who

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had brought ten thousand sleeping men and women safe to New Earth; one of the pilots had been Isabel's great-grandmother.

He was thinking about Isabel again! Mike turned his back to the copper moon, and saw movement to the south. Something large approached. At least two huge creatures. Mike stepped behind a tree and watched. All the large Plains-animals were herbivores, but some had vile tempers, and the strength to back them up.

The shapes resolved into two ponderous szithee, each bearing a Shahash armed with a spear. Outriders for a clan migrating to the seacoast for the summer, Mike guessed. The riders should be of the Vrana tribe, and friendly. But Mike wished he had lingered at the ranch long enough to get his rifle.

The aliens had round bald heads, huge blunt noses, small black eyes, and large, powerful bodies, with hairless hides mottled red, pink, and black. Despite their extra arms, the Shahashee really did look like pigs.

Mike's eyes widened. He ran out of the trees and waved his arms, crying, "Osai! Thalu!"

The two Shahashee kicked their six-legged szithee into odd, lumbering gallops and shouted, "Miko!"

Three years had passed since he'd seen them last, but Mike recognized Osai and Thalu by their faces and the patterns of their skin. Mike smiled. He had not expected to see them again.

He wondered if the huge szithee would run him down before their riders could stop them. He tensed, preparing to jump aside. But the animals halted, and Osai and Thalu stuck their spears in saddle-sheaths and dismounted.

As always, Osai and Thalu wore short, multi-colored szith-wool skirts and numerous strings of seashells and stone beads, and glass beads of human manufacture. Though they circled the neck, the strings were not necklaces; they draped the ribcage front and back, and wound around the waist under the second set of arms.

Mike stared at Osai. What happened to *her?* She had small breasts now. Osai was rathu, the childbearing sex; he shouldn't be surprised. Yet he was shocked.

Osai and Thalu did not wear the clothing and scars of Shahash adults, but they would soon.

Thalu and Osai were smiling. Their teeth resembled a human's, except they were too big. The aliens each placed an upper hand on Mike's shoulder and a lower hand on his back, in the Shahash friend-greeting. Mike's friends had gotten tall, taller even than he'd expected; Osai was seven feet and Thalu over six feet. Looking up into their faces, Mike found it suddenly difficult to believe they were not older than he, but a year younger.

Stretching, Mike put a hand on the shoulder of each. "Aithana, tashee,"

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he said, and repeated in English: "Welcome, friends." He knew barely ten words of Vranashee.

Osai said, "Hi, Miko."

Thalu said, "It's good to see you, Miko."

"A long time since we see you," said Osai. "Eat with us?"

"I'd like that," said Mike. Her words had reminded him he hadn't eaten since breakfast. But it was discourteous not to share food. "I've got nothing to offer, though—"

"Next time," Osai said.

The aliens tied their mounts' reins to a tree far from Mike's horse; horses and szithee did not get along. Both szithee appeared sexless, which meant they were rathu.

Osai and Thalu opened their saddlebags. Mike realized he was staring at Osai's breasts again. He looked at Thalu. Thalu's skirt showed a bulge. The ovipositor. It was obvious now that Thalu was tro, the egg-producing sex. Mike turned away, a blush warming his face as images from the exobiology video flooded his mind.

The video of mating Shahashee had shown that, for conception to take place, the tro inserted the conical ovipositor into the rathu's posterior vaginal entrance, while the acha inserted his smaller, corkscrew phallus into the rathu's forward vaginal entrance. The acha, in comparison to the other two, was short, light, almost delicate. The rathu was the tallest and strongest of the sexes, for she had simultaneously to support the full weight of the acha, who clung to her, and the partial weight of the tro, who mounted her; New-Earth vertebrates needed every one of their six limbs. The acha ejaculated thousands of tiny cells into the rathu, while the tro ejaculated a single large cell, the ovum. The rathu was not just a womb for the other two sexes, however; her uterus coated the fertilized egg with genetic material.

"Miko, come eat!" Osai said. Mike turned. Osai and Thalu were kneeling in the grass near the stream. Mike knelt facing them, the third point of a triangle. Osai and Thalu tipped up their heads, and Mike did the same. Osai raised her upper arms and spoke, a stream of words incomprehensible to Mike, but he kept his face turned to the clear blue sky. He knew Osai was praying to the sun, the moons, and the sky.

When she fell silent, Mike lowered his head. Thalu filled his left hand with strips of dried meat. Osai's lower hands pressed two redfruit into his right hand, straining his fingers.

"Eshana banu," Mike said. "Thanks." He dropped one redfruit and bit into the other. The skin was thin and tough as a tomato's, the flesh firm and juicy as a peach. He wiped his mouth. "Where's the rest of your clan?"

Thalu pointed south with an upper hand. "Trade-meet."

"Oh yeah!" Mike said. He'd forgotten that the early-summer trade-

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meet coincided with the end of school. He hadn't been to a human/Vrana trade-meet since he was ten, when the other ranch boys decided they were too old to play with pigs.

Thalu said, "You miss many trade-meets, Miko."

"Six," Mike said. "Three years." A long time. He was very glad to see his friends again, yet they made him uncomfortable. "Are you guys going to this meet?"

"Later, yes, maybe," Osai said. "Now, we want to be away from the tribe for a little time."

"I can understand *that*," Mike said. "What've you guys been up to since I last saw you?"

Osai and Thalu told him. Though they spoke in halting English, he became absorbed in their tales of travel across the Eastern Plains, of hunts for zak and kwell, and of the long hard ride to escape a larger tribe whose territory the Vranashee had entered while hunting the fleet atheeree. At first, both Osai and Thalu spoke. But Osai fell silent, and shifted restlessly. Mike wondered if she were bored. He saw she hadn't finished her meal, which the nomadic Shahashee always did because they were never sure where their next meal was coming from. Was she ill?

Thalu concluded a tale Mike had lost track of, and drank from the spring. He seemed to notice Osai's restlessness, for he put his upper hands on her shoulders, and with his lower raised water to her lips. She drank from his hands.

The light seemed different. Mike looked up, and was startled to find the sun halfway down the western sky. White Zhou had set, swift little Stanislaus was long-gone, and copper-coin Okafo stood high in the east. A fitful breeze was blowing now. It rustled the small pale leaves of the trees; it swung the bell-shaped white flowers which grew along the stream and carried their sweet fragrance to Mike. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, and noticed another smell, a new odor that swiftly strengthened. He snorted, but the musky smell invaded his head and raced through his blood and aroused him so intensely that the tormenting horniness of the last month seemed like something he'd only read about.

He was entangled with Isabel, kissing her, clutching her, as she returned his kisses and his thrusts. He opened his eyes to escape the images, and saw Osai and Thalu kissing, just like a couple of humans, except that they embraced each other with two pairs of arms.

Mike had played with the alien kids; they'd thrown stick "spears" at each other, wrestled one another to the ground. Why had his friends changed so much? How could they *do* that to him!

Osai and Thalu had come here, Mike realized, because mating was forbidden at the trade-meets. But—

"There's only *two* of you!"

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"We are three," said Osai.

"Huh?" Mike looked around wildly.

Thalu put a hand on Osai's breast.

"*We* are three, Miko," Osai said. "Join us."

She and Thalu reached out to Mike.

Mike jumped up so fast he almost fell. "I gotta run, guys!"

He saw himself embracing Osai, entering her; he fancied he felt, through a thin hot layer of flesh, Thalu's ovipositor sliding against his cock. He was so horny he was in pain, but he didn't want that. He didn't want them.

He shook his head. "Don't get me wrong, you're my friends, but—"

"Friends, yeah," Thalu said. "Of course!"

"Humans don't mate with friends?" Osai's use of "mate" betrayed the xenologists' influence on the Vranashee. Her tone betrayed distress. "Who *do* you mate with?"

"Well, you know, a human falls in love, and . . ."

"'Falls in love'?" Osai said. "What is that?"

"You know," Mike said, and then felt stupid, because they *couldn't* know. They weren't human. They mated when stimulated by the rathu pheromone. The passion ended when the scent faded. The pheromone was clouding his brain, but even with his head clear, could he explain "falling in love" to aliens?

He tried: "When a human falls in love with someone, he thinks about her all the time. He want to, uh, mate with her, sure, but he wants to be with her all the time. For as long as they live—"

"Humans are strange!" Thalu exclaimed.

"Not strange, Thalu," Osai said. "That's what we feel now!"

"*Now*, yeah," Thalu said. "But we don't want to be together *all* the time till we die! And we have other friends."

What was all this talk about friends? Mike said, "I thought you Shahashee just mate with whoever's around when you go into heat."

"You think we mate with *anyone?*" Osai shouted.

Thalu's face twisted. "Only with *friends!*" he cried, and his four hands closed into fists.

Fear came over Mike, so strong he almost forgot his physical distress. "I never thought that!" he cried, although it was precisely the impression he'd gotten from the video. It had been narrated like a film about mating animals.

Thalu's face and hands relaxed. Mike breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"I'm surprised you guys came here alone," he said. "I mean, without an acha friend."

"I don't want to make a kid," Osai said. "I don't want kids."

Mike stared. It had never occurred to him that a Shahash might not want children.

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"Osai," he said, "you don't need to keep away from achanee to avoid having a baby. If you—"

"I *must* keep away," Osai said. "If our acha friend Dhesta is here, we mate with him. We could not stop."

The pheromone would compel them to mate. Mike knew that if Isabel were here now, he'd ask her to make love. But if she said "no," he'd leave her alone, even though he wanted her so badly. They would make love because they chose to, not because they couldn't stop themselves. They weren't animals.

Mike closed his eyes. He wished he were with Isabel now. Today, tomorrow, every day. This was the feeling he'd described to the aliens. He couldn't deny it any more, he was in love with Isabel.

Was love just a trick of the mating instinct?

"So we come here with no acha," Osai concluded. The energy was gone from her voice. She didn't want to be separated from her friend Dhesta. Maybe she loved him.

Love was not just instinct, if desire for the loved one could be ignored despite overpowering need. The aliens' pheromone and hormones were powerful, but did not enslave them. The Shahashee were not animals. Like humans, they had choices, and made them.

Mike remembered he wanted to tell Osai something. "Osai," he said, "you won't have kids if you mate with Thalu in front and Dhesta in back."

Thalu's face twisted again, and Osai said, "That is *wrong!*" She sounded deeply disturbed. Thalu wrapped all his arms around her and pulled her close. "Forbidden!" she said.

Taboo, Mike thought. "If you can't mate with your partners in the wrong positions," he said, "how can you mate with a *human?*"

"You're not tro or acha," Osai said simply.

"It would be wrong for me to watch you mate," Mike said. "Goodbye, Osai. Goodbye, Thalu."

"Etresha'atre," they said. It was the Goodbye and God-bless-you of the Vranashee.

Thalu grinned. "Miko, come back to the trade-meets!"

"I will."

Mike placed the bit in his horse's mouth, untied the reins from the branch, and swung into the saddle.

Thalu and Osai were looking at each other, their faces close together. Osai extended an upper hand to touch Thalu's face, and Thalu gently kissed her.

"It's making love," Mike said. They looked at him. "When you mate with a friend you feel close to, it's making love."

"Making love," Osai said. She kissed Thalu.

Mike rode away. The smell of the pheromone swiftly faded, but not its effect. He changed the horse's gait, but was still reminded of the rhythms

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of sex. Rhythms he'd never experienced, save in dreams, but which it seemed he had always known.

Finally Mike dismounted and led his horse. Walking in the heeled boots was uncomfortable, but he had reached the mouth of Stein-Carver Valley, and the ranch was only a mile away.

Mike's arousal waned, but his thoughts remained on Isabel. He remembered every time he'd seen Isabel watching him when she thought he didn't know, studying him from behind a terminal or an easel, her eyes black and sharp. He saw her talking to her friends, to their teachers; he heard her voice. When the class sang, he heard her voice above all others, and enjoyed it, though she was never in tune. If he only wanted her because his hormones were heated up, if he only liked her voice because his lust made it sound sexy, then would he want to know what she thought about music, about school, about ranchers? About love? He wanted to know what she thought about everything.

He had never talked to her, because she was a girl. A *townie.*

The Stein-Carver ranch came into sight. Mike saw no one in the yard or the fields. He was glad not to see his father.

The grey mare wasn't in the corral. Mike hoped his older sister had taken the mare to be bred. If his *father* had had to take the mare—Mike shook his head. He didn't want to think about how angry his father would be then.

His father. Mike's shoulders slumped. He couldn't get involved with a townie. Vance Stein-Gordon wouldn't just be angry, he'd be contemptuous. He'd lose all respect for his son.

Mike would not talk to Isabel.

Vance Stein-Gordon stepped out of the barn.

"I just got home," he said. "I had more than enough to do today, but I had to take the mare to be bred, too." His eyes narrowed. "When I tell you to do something, boy, you *do* it!"

"Yes, sir." Mike wanted to look down, but that would only make his father angrier. He met Vance's eyes, and was startled to realize he was taller than his father. "I'm sorry, sir."

"What the hell did you think you were doing, running off like that?" Vance did not strike his children; he rarely touched them. But he seized Mike by the shoulder and shook him. "You didn't run off to see that black *townie,* did you?"

Mike's eyes widened. "No!"

He wasn't as different from the aliens as he'd thought; why had he believed townies and ranchers were so different when they were all human? Why did his father believe it?

"Keep away from townie girls," Vance said. "The worthless bitches—God, what is that *smell?*" He sniffed. "You've been fucking an *alien!*"

The words struck Mike like an unexpected punch, sinking sickeningly deep into his stomach. "I have not!"

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"I won't have my children *lying* to me!" Vance screamed. "Unnatural bastard!"

He slapped Mike in the face.

Mike wondered why he'd been so afraid of what his father might think. "Maybe I am, but I never fucked an alien," he said quietly.

Vance shouted wordlessly and swung again. Mike seized his father's wrist.

Mike's grip increased Vance's fury. He wrenched his arm violently, but could not pull free. A startled expression seeped like ice water across his face, and the anger flickered and failed.

Mike pushed his father away. "Never call me a liar," he said. "And never touch me again."

He turned his back on his father. He climbed in the saddle. As he twitched the reins, setting his horse in motion, his hands shook and his stomach tightened, but not for fear of what his father would say or do when he came back from town. Mike's anxiety had a cause far more immediate and important. He had decided to talk to Isabel. ●

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and mailing address, even if you use e-mail. Letters can be e-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's*, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence *only*—questions about subscriptions should be directed to Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625.

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Lisa Goldstein

Lisa Goldstein's last story for *Asimov's*, "The Narcissus Plague" (July 1994), was nominated for a Nebula award, and the paperback edition of her new novel, a contemporary fantasy called *Walking the Labyrinth*, has just come out from Tor Books. She returns to our pages with a stinging look at the path to . . .

FORTUNE AND MISFORTUNE

This is my story, but first I have to tell you about Jessie.

Jessie and I met at an audition. My agent had told me they were looking for someone to play a contemporary high school kid so I dressed the part—torn baggy jeans, white T-shirt, red flannel shirt tied around my waist.

I'd been waiting for about five minutes when Jessie walked in and gave her name to the receptionist. She wore one of those dress-for-success costumes that make women look like clowns—skirt and jacket of bright primary colors (hers were red), big buttons down the front, hugely padded shoulders. She looked at me and then down at herself and laughed and grimaced at the same time. It was an oddly endearing expression, the gesture of someone who knows how to poke fun at herself.

"You're so clever," she said. She glanced at her outfit again. "I've probably blown it already."

She looked as if she wanted to talk further, but just then the receptionist called her name. I felt annoyed—I'd been waiting longer than she had, though I knew that that had nothing to do with Hollywood's pecking order. She was closeted with the casting people for about ten minutes. When she came out she looked at me, held her palms up and shrugged elaborately. Her gesture said, clearly as words, I have no idea whether I made it or not.

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I didn't think about her until the next cattle call, when I saw her again. She was wearing the same clothes—I wondered if it was the only decent outfit she owned. I was reading a magazine, but she sat down next to me anyway.

"Did you get called back for that high school thing?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"Neither did I. I'm Jessie."

"I'm Pam."

The receptionist called my name then. I felt a rush of pleasure at being called first—this woman wasn't all that far above me after all. "Listen," she said as I stood up. "If I get called next, wait for me and we'll go to lunch. I don't know too many people in this town."

"Okay," I said.

She did get called next. I waited, and when she came out she offered to drive us to a coffee shop in Westwood.

I had already pegged her as someone very much like myself, just barely getting by on bit parts and commercials and waitressing jobs. So I was surprised to see her walk up to a white BMW and turn off the car alarm. She must have noticed my expression, because she laughed. "Oh, it's not mine," she said. "I rent it for casting calls. You have to play the game, make them think you're worth it."

I'd heard this before, of course. In an image-conscious town like Hollywood every little bit helps. A fancy car isn't enough to land you a part, though, and I wondered if she had any acting ability to back it up.

I got in the car and she drove us to the restaurant. When we were seated she looked directly at me and said, "So. Where would I have seen you?"

I told her about my few commercials and the made-for-cable movie I'd done. "I was Iras in *Antony and Cleopatra* at the San Diego Shakespeare festival," I said. "I was also the understudy for Rosalind in *As You Like It*, but the damned woman refused to get sick."

She seemed a little puzzled at this. Wondering why I bothered with Shakespeare, maybe. "What about you?" I asked.

"I had a bit part on a soap," she said. "It was a great gig, until they killed my character off."

"I'm sorry," I said, and she laughed.

Los Angeles, they say, is where the best-looking boy and the prettiest girl from every high school in the country end up. You can't sneeze in this town without infecting a former high school beauty queen or football quarterback. Even so, I thought this woman astonishingly beautiful. She had deep sea-blue eyes, dark lashes, and a mass of dark hair. More than that, though, she had some subtle arrangement of bone structure that compelled you to look at her. She might just make it, I thought, and felt the envy that had dogged me ever since I had come to town. Next to her

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all my faults stood out in sharp relief—I was too short, too plain, my mouth too thin. I hate myself when I feel this petty, I struggle against it, but I don't seem to be able to help it.

As penance I made an effort to like her. And really, it wasn't that difficult. She had probably been told that she was beautiful since before she could understand the words, but for some reason she didn't seem to believe it. She ridiculed herself, her ambitions, the idea that she could make it in Hollywood where so many others had failed.

"My parents are sure I'll come crawling home within the year," she said. "You wouldn't believe the arguments I had before I left. Well, it's the old story, isn't it—young girl from the country goes to Hollywood."

"Where are you from?"

"A farming town in Wisconsin. You've never heard of it. What about you?"

"Chicago."

"And how did your parents take it?"

"Actually, they've been pretty supportive," I said. "Especially my father. He did amateur theatricals in college. He said, 'I think you're good enough, but unfortunately what I think doesn't count for much. You have my blessing.' And then he laughed—he'd never said anything so old-fashioned in his life."

"That's great." She was silent for a while, no doubt thinking about the differences between us. "Listen, Pam," she said. "I'm going to an audition next week. It's another high school student. Ask your agent about it."

"Sure," I said, surprised. I would never tell a rival about an audition. Jessie was someone to keep, a caring, genuine person in a town full of hypocrites. "Thanks."

"See you there," she said.

We saw each other a lot after that. We went to plays and movies and critiqued the performances, took the white BMW to cattle calls, made cheap dinners for each other and shopped at outlet clothing stores. We took tap-dancing lessons together, from a woman who looked about as old as Hollywood itself. Jessie told me about auditions coming up and I began to tell her if I'd heard anything, though each time it was an effort for me.

She got called back to her soap—they wanted her to do a dream sequence with the man who'd played her lover. We rehearsed the scene together, with me taking the lover's part.

It was the first time I'd seen her act. She was good, there was no question of that, but there was something she lacked, that spark that true geniuses have. The envious part of me rejoiced—this woman, I thought, would not be a threat. But there was another side of me that regretted she wasn't better. I liked Jessie, I wanted to see her succeed. I felt almost protective toward her, like a mother toward a child. She was so innocent—I didn't want her to get hurt.

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I was offered several parts at the Berkeley Shakespeare Festival and began to make arrangements to go up north. Jessie was pleased for me, but by this time she knew me well enough to speak her mind. "There aren't going to be any casting directors up there, Pam," she said. "Those parts aren't going to lead to anything. It's an honor, I know that, but it might be better to stay in town, see what you can get here."

"I need to stretch myself, see what I can do," I said. And when she seemed unconvinced I added, "It'll look good on my résumé."

We rehearsed together again. I had gotten the part of Emilia, Iago's wife, in *Othello,* and I had her take the other roles. As we rehearsed I was amazed to realize that she didn't have any idea what the play was about, that she stumbled speaking the old Elizabethan cadences. I had thought, naïvely I guess, that anyone who wanted to act had had at least some grounding in the classics.

"So this Iago guy, he wants Othello to suspect his wife Desdemona," she said. "He's really evil, isn't he? Do that bit again, the one that starts 'Villainy, villainy, villainy . . .' "

I did. "Hey, you're good," she said. There was nothing but pure pleasure in her voice. "You're really good. I bet you'll make it. Don't forget your old friends."

She had an audition the day I was to leave, so she rented the BMW and drove me to the airport in the morning. We hugged at the curb in front of the terminal, careful not to wish each other good luck, smiling a little at our superstitions.

I had fun in Berkeley. I liked some of the cast, disliked others, felt indifferent to the rest, the way it usually goes. We were busy first with rehearsals and then with the performances themselves, and I didn't have time to get lonely. Every week, though, I'd call Jessie or she'd call me and we'd exchange news.

Finally we settled into a routine and I had time to catch my breath. The man playing Iago told me about an audition in San Francisco, a company that was going to do Sophocles' *Oedipus.* "Almost no money, of course," he said. "But all the prestige you can eat. It'll look good on your résumé."

I called, got an appointment for an audition. Iago loaned me his Berkeley university library card, and I took the BART train over to campus to study up on my Sophocles.

All the way there I could hear Jessie, as clearly as if she were sitting next to me. "Why are you doing this? What possible good can it do you? This isn't going to lead to anything, you know that."

In my mind I told her, firmly, to shut up.

I was a bit overawed by the graduate library stacks at Berkeley: I'd never seen anything quite like them. There's no space between the bookshelves—they sit on tracks and have to be cranked apart by hand. It's the only way they can keep their huge amount of books in one space.

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I found the Oedipus trilogy fairly easily. While I was in the Greek drama section I decided to look around, see if there were any books that might help with an interpretation of the play. I took down a few that looked interesting, then reached for the crank.

I stopped. There was a book on the shelf called *Fortune and Misfortune,* grimy with dust. I don't know why it caught my attention—it looked as if no one had opened it for years, maybe decades. I pulled it down and read at random.

"And he who reads the following words will be plagued by ill fortune for all his life," it said.

This is my story, as I said, but now I'm going to talk about you. Are you comfortable? Probably you are, sitting and reading in your living room, leaning back in your recliner, a pleasant record in the CD player, iced tea or coffee or beer or wine beside you. Or maybe you're sitting in your family van, waiting to pick up your child from school or ballet practice or the orthodontist. The sun is shining, birds are singing.

One of the books I picked up in the library was Aristotle's *Poetics.* Aristotle says that when we watch a tragedy we feel pity and terror as the protagonist falls, and that when the play is over we feel cleansed, pure, a catharsis.

But what about the guy on stage? What about Oedipus, standing there with the gore running down his cheeks after he's plunged Jocasta's brooches into his eyes? Aristotle goes home, whistling, feeling better, feeling glad the tragedy happened to some other poor schmuck, but how does Oedipus feel?

What if the shepherd bringing the final message hadn't said, Oedipus, the reason all the crops are failing and everything is going to shit is because you killed your father and married your mother, you poor fool? What if instead he had looked out into the audience, pointed to, say, Aristotle, and said, "You—you're the reason we're in such a mess. You don't know it, but you've killed your father and married your mother, and now we're all doomed." Would Aristotle have gone home whistling then?

I don't think so. *We feel better when we watch someone else suffer.* But Oedipus, if there really was an Oedipus, and I think there must have been, he doesn't feel better at all.

The first thing that happened was that I didn't get the part of the Messenger in *Oedipus.* Well, I thought, I don't get most of the roles I audition for—you could hardly call this ill fortune.

The second thing was far worse. My mother called the hotel I was staying at and told me that my father had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He'd had stomach aches and nausea for months, but by the time

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he'd finally gone to the doctor it was too late. They gave him a day or two at the most. I took the next flight out.

He died before I could reach him—I never even got the chance to say goodbye. My father, my funny, caring, supportive father, the man who gave me his blessing when I said I wanted to be an actress. I called the company in Berkeley, told them I was staying for the funeral.

My mother wanted a closed casket. Because of this, and because I'd never seen him ill, I couldn't really bring myself to believe he was dead. I had dreams where I'd talk to him, laugh at one of his silly jokes, and then suddenly realize that he wasn't supposed to be there. "But you're dead," I'd say, horrified. Sometimes he'd disappear at that moment, sometimes he'd put his finger to his lips, as if to tell me that these were things that shouldn't be spoken of. Once he told me that he wasn't really dead, he'd just been away on a secret mission somewhere. And every time when I'd wake up my cheeks would be wet with tears. I hadn't known you could cry in your sleep.

The third thing that happened—well, it wasn't as bad, I guess. Certainly no one died, I didn't lose anyone I loved. I got back to Los Angeles to find out that Jessie had auditioned for a part in a major motion picture, and that the director wanted to see her again.

We rehearsed together. I took the part of the boyfriend, which Jessie told me would be played by Harrison Ford. I barely remember what the movie was about, to tell you the truth. I was numb with grief, still coming to terms with all the holes in my life left by my father's death. And I was depressed over my career, the way it seemed that everyone was getting ahead but me.

Jessie tried to be supportive, but she was too excited about the direction her own career had taken. I couldn't blame her, really. The morning of her audition she rented the white BMW and left for the studio. I didn't hear from her until she called at five o'clock that evening.

"I got the part!" she said, a little breathless. "They all loved me, said I was perfect. I did those scenes we practiced with Harrison—what a sweetie he is!"

"That's nice," I said. "Listen, I've got to go—I've got some reading to do."

"Sure," she said. She sounded a little puzzled. Did she really not understand my jealousy? Was she really that naïve?

So I got to watch as Jessie became the next hot actress—this year's blonde, she joked, brushing back her masses of dark hair. Her conversation became thick with the names of famous actors, directors, producers. She rented a condo in Malibu. I thought for sure she would buy that damned BMW she was so proud of but she went one better and showed up at my apartment complex in a silver Jaguar.

"I couldn't resist," she said. "Do you like it? You know how the British

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pronounce Jaguar? They say Jay-gu-ar," and she told me which famous British actor had taught her that.

"It is not enough to succeed," someone in Hollywood had once said, I think Gore Vidal. "Others must fail." I tried to feel happy over Jessie's success, I really did, but I was sunk so deep in misery I couldn't do it.

It all started with that damn book, I thought. It's all because I took that book down and opened it. "And he who reads the following words will be plagued by ill fortune for all his life," it had said. "Trogro. Trogrogrether. Ord, mord, drord. Coho, trogrogrether."

You look up a moment. The birds have stopped singing, a cloud has moved in front of the sun. You thought you were reading a story about someone struggling with death, with bad luck, with her own inner demons—Hamlet's outrageous fortune. You certainly had no idea you would become involved this way. It's too late, though—you've read the words, just as I have.

No, you think. She's imagined the whole thing. Sure, a lot of bad things have happened to her, but it's probably all just coincidence. A bunch of words in an old book—how could that possibly affect me?

It can, though, take my word for it. It happened to me. I know my life went downhill just as soon as I read those words.

You thought you were reading about someone going through a hard time. One of two things would happen—either things would get better for her, or they wouldn't. You were prepared to follow the story from the beginning through the middle to the end, and then you were going to put it down and get on with your life. You were prepared to feel better after it was all over—if it ended happily you'd feel good, of course, but if it didn't you'd still experience the catharsis Aristotle talked about. You were going to feel good watching me suffer.

And now you're the one who's going to suffer. What do you think of that?

I stopped going out. I skipped auditions. I sat on my floor and stared at my carpet, which was a truly hideous shade of brown. I spent a lot of time wondering why anyone would make a carpet that color. And when I wasn't worrying about my carpet I thought about Jessie.

I couldn't turn on the television without seeing her. There were ads for her movie, there was Jessie herself being featured on some entertainment show or talking to Jay Leno about what a sweetie Harrison was. And when her movie came out it got worse. I didn't go see it, of course—there was my carpet to think of—but just about all the critics liked it. The skinny guy on that Sunday evening movie review program practically fell in love with her, though the fat guy didn't go that far. No one noticed that she wasn't a very good actress, that she was missing some-

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thing. I wondered if, in addition to all my other problems, I was going crazy.

Whenever I went to the supermarket, there was her picture waiting for me, on the cover of *People* or some tabloid. One month she was even featured in a house and garden magazine, with pictures of the interior of her Malibu condo. I couldn't help myself—I paged through the article while standing in the check-out line. She'd told the reporter that she wanted to create a space filled with light. I doubted it—she had terrible taste, could barely even dress herself. Probably that was something her interior decorator had said.

I'd been invited to that condo, not once but dozens of times. She urged me to come along with her to parties, told me about the directors and producers who would be there. She offered to take me to dinner. I made excuses, stopped returning her calls. All I needed, I thought, was to owe Jessie my career. No, I'll be honest here—I just didn't want to see her.

I thought a lot about envy. In college I had been in a production of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus,* in the scene with the seven deadly sins. I'd played Envy: "I am Envy, begotten of a chimney-sweeper and an oyster-wife . . . I am lean with seeing others eat. Oh, that there would come a famine over all the world, that all might die, and I live alone, then thou should'st see how fat I'd be!"

If I tried I could remember the six other sins—pride, anger, gluttony, sloth, lechery, and greed. Envy was definitely my sin, though. I thought I would have taken almost any of the others: pride, lechery, even gluttony. Sloth would be good. Here I was, I thought bitterly, envying other people their sins.

The phone rang. I worried that it was Jessie, full of more cheerful good news, but for some reason I answered it. It turned out to be Ellen, a friend of mine from college, and I relaxed.

"Hey, isn't that woman in the movie Jessie What's-her-name?" Ellen asked after we'd caught up on news. "I met her once at your house, didn't I?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Well, give her my congratulations. It must be exciting for her."

"Yeah," I said again. There was silence—a puzzled silence, I thought—at the other end of the line. "I guess this proves beyond a doubt that Hollywood values looks over talent," I said finally.

Ellen laughed. "I thought she was a friend of yours," she said. "I guess not."

"I guess not," I said.

I felt briefly better, and then a whole lot worse. What was I saying? Jessie was a friend, wasn't she? Didn't she deserve better from me? What was wrong with me?

Envy. Envy was wrong with me. I realized when I hung up that I couldn't

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get rid of it, that it was part of me, the way the other sins were part of other people. That's why people in the Middle Ages had named them, why the terms had stayed around for so long. No one was perfect. I would have to come to terms with my sin, domesticate it. I would have to make it mine.

It felt like hard-won wisdom. I would call Jessie, I thought, meet her somewhere for lunch. I'd even congratulate her—congratulations were long overdue. I reached toward the phone I had just hung up.

I stopped. This wasn't taming my envy. This was covering it up, sweeping it under the rug, pretending it didn't exist. I knew what I had to do. I opened my phone book and looked up Jessie's new number.

I got her secretary. I should have expected that. The secretary had me wait while she looked through a list of approved callers. I was on the list, she told me, in a voice that suggested I'd just won a car. I felt absurdly grateful.

She put me on hold and then Jessie came on. "Hi, how are you doing?" she said. "It's been far too long." She sounded cheerful, happy to hear from me.

"Not too good," I said. I told her the whole story, the book in the library, the calamities that had happened soon after, the terrible envy I had felt over her success. I very nearly recited the words from the book to her, but something stopped me. That wouldn't be coming to terms with envy—that would be giving it free rein.

"You ninny," she said when I finished.

My heart sank. She hadn't understood. She had never been bothered by envy—she couldn't know how devastating it could be. Any minute now she would say, "Why on earth should you envy me?" or something equally inane.

Instead she said, "What about the book?"

"What?" I said stupidly. I couldn't imagine what she might be talking about.

"The book in the library. You said it was called *Fortune and Misfortune*. If it has a phrase that brings bad luck, it probably has one for good luck as well."

I stood still for long seconds, dumbfounded. "Oh my God," I said finally. "Listen, I've got to go."

"Tell me what happens," she said. "And good luck!"

I called a cab to take me to the Los Angeles airport. I got a stand-by flight to Oakland, and took BART from Oakland to the Berkeley campus. I didn't have time to call Iago, the guy with the library card, so I bought my own.

I cranked apart the shelves in the Greek drama section. The book wasn't there. It had probably been misfiled, I thought. It certainly wasn't about Greek drama. I ran out of the stacks and waited to use a computer terminal.

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Nothing with that title was listed in either GLADIS or MELVYL, the two university catalogues. I went back to the stacks, looked on the shelf above and the one below. Nothing.

I'm going to stay here until I find it, I thought. I turned the crank to get to the next shelf, then the one after that. *Fortune and Misfortune,* I thought. A black book, covered with dust.

I looked at books until my eyes blurred, turned the crank until my muscles ached. I waited impatiently while someone perused a shelf I had already looked at, eager and anxious to turn the crank and move on. I was still carrying my overnight bag, hastily packed with a change of clothes, and I set it down to concentrate on my task. A black book, covered with dust.

After a few hours the lights, already dim, darkened further like the signal to return to a play after intermission. The library was closing. I left the stacks, asked one of the librarians if he could recommend a cheap place to stay.

I returned the next day, without the overnight bag. And the day after that, and the one after that. I had packed only one change of clothes, and I needed a laundromat very badly. But I couldn't take the time.

Finally, on the fifth day, I found it. I couldn't believe it at first—I had to read the title at least three or four times to make sure. But this was definitely the book. The dust was spotted with fingerprints, my own and those of whoever had misshelved it.

My hands were trembling. I opened the book and read the headings at the top of the pages. Phrases for health, love, money, beauty, knowledge. All these things would have interested me once but I rifled past them, looking for the section I wanted, hoping it would be there.

It was. "And the following words will bring good fortune forever, and are proof against all words of ill fortune," I read. "Tay, tay, tray. Tiralanta, tiralall. All, call, lall. Tiralanta, tiralall."

So. Those are the words—the bad luck you had begun to fear will not strike, and maybe even something truly wonderful is about to happen to you. Maybe the phone is ringing right now, maybe it's good news. I won't tell you what happened to me after I read these words—it's outside the scope of this story, and anyway I think I've already done enough for you. I will say that I was sick and bitter for a long time but that now I'm better, though I'll never be entirely free of these awful feelings. And that the change in my fortune did not start when I read the book the second time, but when Jessie reached out her hand to me and started to pull me toward health. It's because of her friendship, and my father's love, that I can pass along these words to you. It's still difficult for me, but I give you—I give you all—my blessing. ●

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James Sarafin

James Sarafin was born and raised in Columbus, Ohio, and received a B.A. in English and a law degree from Ohio State University. In the seventies, he taught English in Osaka, Japan, but for the past fifteen years, he's worked as a civil trial lawyer in Anchorage, Alaska. For recreation, Mr. Sarafin spends "as much time as possible in Alaska's wilderness, fishing, hunting, river running, and mountain trekking. Like many Alaskans, much of my family's food resources come from wild fish and game." Some of this experience is readily apparent in his heart-stopping look at the hunter and the hunted . . .

IN THE FURNACE OF THE NIGHT

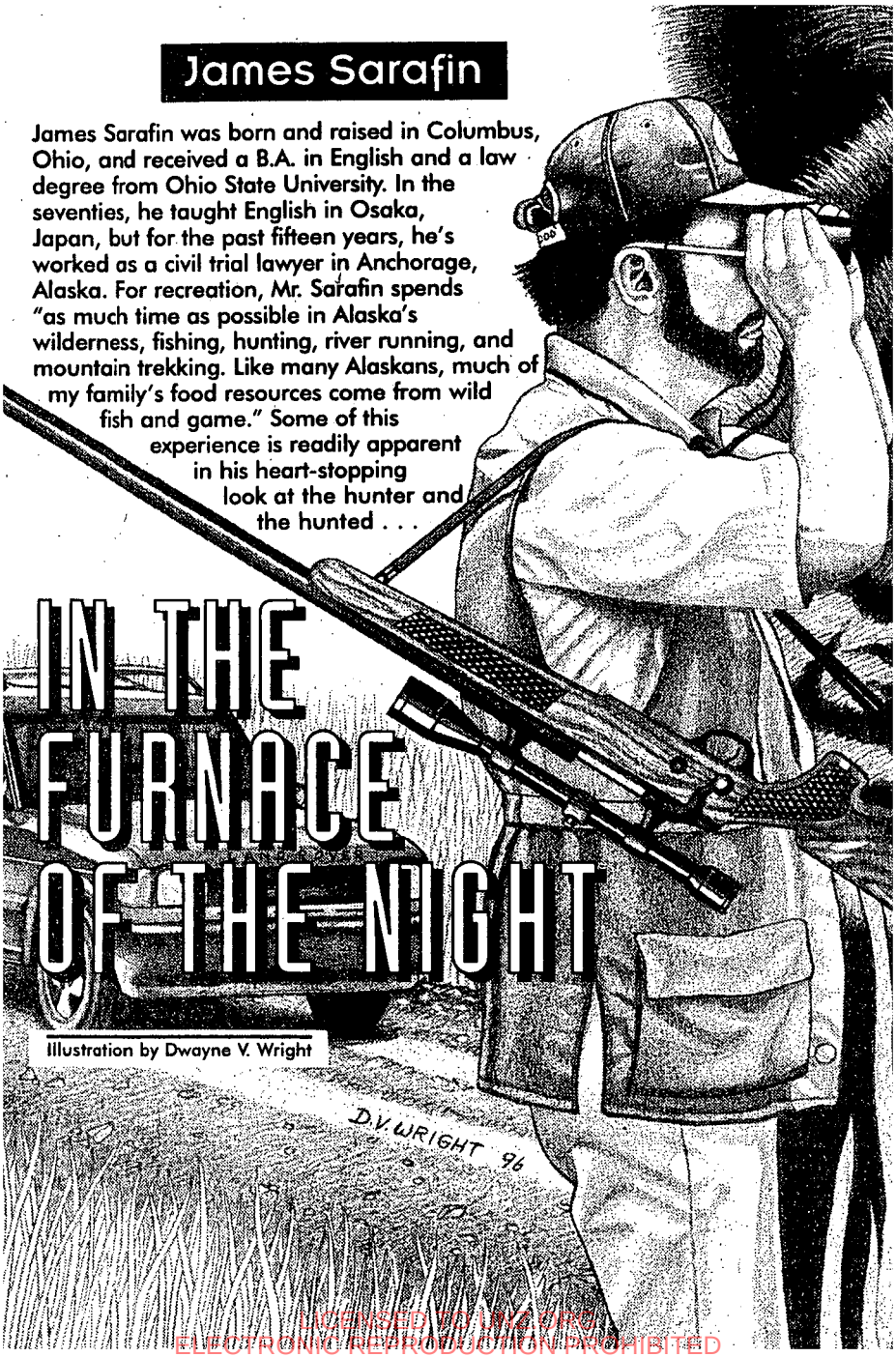

Illustration by Dwayne V. Wright

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"In what furnace was thy brain?"
—William Blake, "The Tyger"

As Barry Murtoch walked downhill, through the brush and burgeoning grass, a quickening of the mid-morning breeze brought him the smell of death. Decomposition would progress quickly in the heat and humidity brought by the monsoons—which meant he'd probably found the missing park guards. The vultures spiraling over the river seemed to confirm it.

The ground leveled out near the river and the dried, brown stalks of last season's grass still stood nearly head-high. His wristwatch, functioned to the global positioning system, revealed that they were nearing the missing guards' locator. He slowed on the faint trail to a take-two-steps-and-pause advance, scanning the openings in the grass, through which he could see patches of water gleaming like fresh-cut steel. Brilliant yellow butterflies swarmed along the shore, wings slowly flexing as they stopped to drink amidst the bright green aquatic vegetation. Waterfowl chortled from somewhere out in the slow current.

The stench grew stronger.

Barry removed his hands, one at a time, from the stock of his rifle and tried to wipe them dry on his canvas bush shorts. Little help, with his clothing sweat-soaked too. From the corner of his eye he noted that even Joshua and Robert, his Ndebele trackers following two paces behind, were sweating profusely. This India, now—how had Genghis Khan described it? "The heat is bad and the water makes men sick." Fitting. The southern African summer was nothing compared to this, and he hadn't seen any water yet that he would dare drink. Only Emily Kammath, the chief park biologist, who looked half-Indian and spoke as if she'd been educated at Oxford, seemed impervious to the heat as she strolled behind the trackers.

A shadow wheeled across the grass in front of him. The vultures in the air might be late arrivals, or there could be something else on the kill ahead of them. Something they feared.

"Wait here, while we take a quick look," he whispered to Kammath.

Nothing he knew stretched the nerves as tightly as pursuing dangerous game in dense cover. As was customary in such situations, Barry, the professional hunter, stayed slightly ahead of the trackers. He kept his thumb on the safety and finger in the trigger guard, ignoring the swarm of biting flies that circled persistently around his head. His boots sucked in mud as he came into the open where the high riparian grass gave way to low aquatic vegetation. A flock of ducks ran wing-beating across the water in alarm and took flight, going quack with each beat of their wings, beating and running quack quack quack across the water until they lifted off and tucked in their feet behind them.

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He saw at once that the blind was a bloody shambles.

It must have seemed a good place to the two park guards. Recent kills of villagers and nomadic refugees showed that the cats had been moving along the river here. The blind had been constructed in the reeds near the end of a narrow peninsula jutting out between the river's main channel and a sidewater slough, with three walls of woven cane and leafy branches that formed a rough triangle, its base toward the bait. Now the walls were flattened and torn to the winds, leaving a raw patch of churned red earth. A mass of vultures hopped and squabbled over whatever lay dead there.

The bait, a two-year-old domestic buffalo, was kneeling at the shore end of its tether. At sight of the three men it stood and lowed plaintively.

Barry moved quickly out onto the open, mucky sand of the peninsula, turning to scan the grass on both sides behind him. Why the hell was the bait still alive? A trail of blood and flattened grass led past the buffalo's tether and into the thick grass on shore. But the saturated, mucky ground showed no clear tracks.

Barry exchanged looks with the trackers; they all knew what the cat must have dragged off. The buffalo kept lowing as Barry walked toward the end of the peninsula, and the vultures finally took to leaden flight. A dead man lay on his back on the edge of the churned ground, his green Indian Forestry Department uniform shredded by the vultures' beaks. Murtoch had seen plenty of cat kills, several of them human remains, and he took his time examining this one.

The vultures had left a mess, but the man appeared to have been killed by a single bite to the head. Four canines driven through the sides of the skull like steel spikes in a hydraulic press. Unusual technique. Most big cats naturally killed by using a choke-hold. Man-eaters would soon learn how soft-skinned humans are, and tear out the throat instead of trying to choke. Except for leopards, which were fond of simply holding onto the neck or shoulder while their churning hind claws raked out the victim's bowels. But this cat had discovered an even faster way to kill. The man's rifle lay unfired beside him; the safety wasn't even off, so he must have been caught completely unawares. There was no sign of the second man. Except for the drag marks.

"Have you found something?" Emily Kammath had hardly waited before approaching the blind. She seemed to believe that her own military-version Sig smart-rifle provided all the protection she'd need. For poachers only, she'd claimed.

For poachers, bullets that would lock on to the target and explode at nearest proximity might be the best medicine. But Barry was used to operating under the rules of Fair Chase, the code of the sporting hunt, which mostly banned twenty-first-century technology. This was no sporting hunt, but for big cats, Murtoch still preferred the punch and penetra-

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tion of his old bolt-action .375 H&H Magnum, a cartridge developed more than a century ago.

"What happened?" Emily asked.

Murtoch simply pointed with his rifle. She knew everything; let her come on ahead, then. See how strong her stomach was. Probably'd take one look and puke.

The two trackers were circling, studying the ground. Lots of scuff marks, but Barry himself could discern no whole, clear prints. Where the hell had the cat come from? How could it have come in, right past the buffalo, unless both men were sound asleep or dead drunk?

Joshua called from the edge of the river behind the blind, and pointed to a bare patch of sand holding a single print headed out of the water. The print of a big, big cat, far larger than any lion Barry had ever seen. The track of a tiger—a pugmark, as they called it here; yet larger than any tiger that God or nature had ever inflicted on India. Its location didn't explain how a cat that size could have swum across the river without being seen by the guards.

"It isn't one of the tigers, is it?" Emily called.

For a moment Barry was puzzled. What did she think killed the guards? Then he understood: she was asking about what *had been killed.*

"Congratulations," he told her. "Looks like you've bred yourself a real super-predator."

Barry watched as Emily approached the site of the blind. He waited for her to stagger back, fall on her knees retching. Instead, she stepped up to the body, placing her feet carefully outside the gore, and removed a small measuring tape from a shirt pocket. He went forward to see her measuring the bite marks on the man's head. She stood up and looked at him distantly, showing no other awareness or concern for either the dead man or the pool of clotted blood, and spoke a single, unfamiliar word:

"Shaitan."

They said nothing. Nothing as they toiled up the trail from the river to the rover parked along the road. Nothing as the rover bounced and jarred on the rutted muddy road back to camp. Nothing because there was nothing he would yet ask or she would offer to explain. Nothing because there was nothing, and never could there be more than nothing, between the biologist in charge of the Ranthambhore National Park tiger restoration program, and the professional hunter who specialized in helping clients slay leopards and an occasional lion for his living, but who never, ever in his forty-seven years of life had imagined that he would one day be asked to shoot tigers.

India had banned the hunting of tigers more than fifty years ago. Aside from poachers, only a handful of old men had ever hunted a tiger. But, just as in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sport and trophy

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hunters worldwide continued to pay large sums to hunt in Africa. Economic interests in preserving the safari business had kept most African game populations healthy; and the hunting ranches could satisfy demand for endangered species, such as elephants, lions, and rhinos, with cloned copies. So when the Indian Forestry Department needed a professional cat hunter, it went looking in Africa.

Barry and his safari company had just flown from Kariba, Zimbabwe, to Jaipur, India, the night before, and this same morning had caught the helicopter to a camp southeast of the park. Barry's feet had barely touched ground when the park director advised him that two park guards had been missing since the previous day, and would he please go check on their blind?

"I am the administrator, never a man of the field," Director Ghouri had said. "Regretfully, the rest of the guards are patrolling in other territories. Or have become ill. And the villagers, they are too terrified to be of any assistance in this most unfortunate enterprise." The director provided him with maps, as well as a key-card that would let him open the gates that barricaded the old park roads, in case he had to enter Ranthambhore to look for the guards.

So Barry had shrugged off the double-whammy of jet-lag and moving from the southern African winter to a sweltering tropical summer, and climbed into the rover beside the driver. The biologist had invited herself along before she'd even been introduced. An hour later the driver stopped and pointed at a game trail leading downhill into the brush. He refused to leave the vehicle, launching into a speech in Hindi.

"He says these are weretigers," Emily translated, "and can't be harmed by bullets. It's an old Indian belief, Mr. Murtoch, just as the Europeans believed in humans who could become wolves." She'd seemed quite amused.

Barry knew that no cat was bulletproof. The whole trick would be to get close enough to get off a good, clear shot. Now, as they headed back to camp, he recognized what a trick that might be.

The rover climbed over a ridge of gnarled trees scattered among the grass and weeds that grew almost visibly in the sun and the rains brought by the onset of monsoon season. Even under the open top, Barry could smell the faint, nauseating tang that always seemed to leak somewhere out of methane-powered vehicles. At the crest of the hill, from inside the park boundary, the ruins of an ancient stone temple gleamed in the afternoon sun. A flock of partridge went up from the edge of the road, whirring over the sound of the laboring engine, winging upslope toward the ruins.

Edward, Barry's general camp manager, came out of the air-conditioned dining tent to meet the rover. It was by now far too hot for any sane person to remain outdoors. Edward took one look at Barry's face and didn't need to ask.

"What happened to the park director?" Barry asked.

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"Mr. S.K. Ghouri took the helicopter back to town." Edward, who was frequently in charge of entertaining non-hunting spouses and visitors, was quite good at remembering names after a single mention, even non-African ones, just as he could catalog the camp's food stores and supplies down to the last sack of rice and solar-rechargeable battery. "He asked that you call in a report as soon as you got back."

Once within the blessed cool of his tent, Barry had his notebook place the call. Ghouri was stroking his densely bearded face as his image appeared in the notebook's little screen, and immediately inquired about the guards.

"Both dead, I'm afraid," Barry told him. "Looked like one of the cats—probably the adult tigress—crept up on them from behind. We only found one body. I'm afraid the other was carried off."

"Those men I hired myself. They have families, both." Ghouri had obviously tried to prepare himself for the worst, but his face still registered shock. "And the body count now is raised to sixty-four, not counting poachers."

Barry waited a moment for the man to absorb the news before asking his first question. "Mr. Ghouri, do tigers swim? I don't mean just to cross a river when they have to, but will they do it as a matter of choice?"

"That knowledge, I fear, is beyond me. India has no wild tigers outside Ranthambhore in these times, and only the guards and park biologists have been allowed in the park for more than a decade. That is the question Ms. Kammath could perhaps answer."

"She's not saying much of anything, actually. I thought all the park employees were supposed to cooperate with our effort."

"Really, she is in employment of the U.N., not the Forestry Department or the Indian civil service by any means."

Barry tried to keep his voice and face neutral. "I told you when I was retained that I know next to nothing about tigers. Are you telling me now that I can't expect help from the one person who knows the most about them?"

The director shifted in his chair. "She is one target of investigation for criminal negligence. Most unfortunately, we still do not know how these animals escaped from the preserve. Her AI's legal module has insisted on preserving her privilege against self-incrimination, so long as she's not guaranteed immunity from prosecution." His raised his hands helplessly. "So many dead already, Mr. Murtoch, and who knows how many more. An uproar would arise most strenuously if anyone were granted immunity at this stage."

Barry wondered why he had ever agreed to re-schedule clients at the height of his hunting season, just to come to this steaming Indian jungle. Because the Indians had offered twice his full daily rates, plus expenses, that's why.

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And for the chance to hunt the most dangerous land predator on earth.

"Look, I need this woman's cooperation. She knows these individual animals enough to recognize them from their sign. Apparently, she's even named them. Do you know what 'Shaitan' means? I think that's what she calls the cat that killed your guards. Then she promptly clammed up after she'd said it." The word nagged at Barry's memory—something he might have heard before.

There was a pause as Ghouri studied the console in front of him, while his personal AI did a search. After a moment he said, with some exasperation, "It is an old Islamic word, related to the Hebraic word 'saytan'—'Satan' in English—and means devil, or a dark spirit. More of that weretiger nonsense, I predict."

"I don't know. The way she reacted—like she hadn't meant to say it out loud."

"I will expand the search, when permitted by my schedule. Meanwhile, do not let yourself be distracted, Mr. Murtoch. You are supposed to be the best cat hunter in the world. Three dead tigers would be most regrettable, but the local situation demands you to stop them by whatever means. Unless Ms. Kammath can suggest an effective means of live-capture, you must destroy them."

"After what I saw today," Barry said to himself, when they'd signed off, "I'll be lucky to get a shot."

He knew his safari company had been hired as a last resort, after all attempts to capture the tigers and return them to the preserve had failed. Somehow the cats avoided every trap, pit, and snare set for them, and wouldn't go near any ground blinds or tree machans from which they could be darted or netted. Four times park guards had spotted them by air and attempted to dart them or drive them toward other guards on the ground, but these efforts had either come up blank or resulted in more casualties.

Now it was Murtoch to the rescue. Best bloody cat hunter in the world. What a laugh.

He had been ignoring the thirst for some time, but now his hands quivered as he pulled a case from under his cot and removed the first bottle of fine single-malt Scotch. Drinking was an old safari tradition, and it was also traditional that the client paid for the professional hunter's liquor; Barry intended to invoice the case as an expense. He had worked most of the first double-shot around his tongue and down the throat when Edward came to tell him that dinner was about to be served.

"Ms. Kammath is already at the table," Edward advised.

"Let her wait. Or serve her if she wants. I haven't finished cleaning my rifle."

The African safari business still preserved the old English and European colonial tradition that hunting should be a sport reserved for the

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upper class, well-attended by servants. Barry had been asked to bring the whole contingent and he had brought it, including his trackers and camp attendants. But he always cleaned his own rifle. Usually, the same rifle, this old Sako, which he had acquired when he'd bought out the former safari company owner years before. His wealthy clients had made him gifts of many fine rifles over the years; he'd sold them or given them away. Except for his heavy rifle, used only at close range when a client had allowed wounded game to escape, he always carried the Sako, and fired the same controlled-expansion bullets. He didn't want to clutter his mind with more than one set of ballistics, to have his thumb confused by other safeties or his finger by other triggers.

With a lightly oiled rag he wiped the barrel and action, every place it had been touched that day, and ran a patch down the inside of the barrel to remove any debris that might have collected inside. His hands moved with exaggerated care and deliberation brought on by the whiskey. By the time he finished, the second double shot was warming his stomach. He took the glass and bottle with him out to dinner. The heat outside his air-conditioned tent enveloped him like a wave and held him in its smothering embrace until he reached the dining tent.

"Nice of you to join us," Emily said. "Did you have to bring your friend?" She glanced pointedly at the bottle as Barry set it carefully and quite steadily on the table. The dining tent was lit with an old-style petrol pressure lamp—traditional camp atmosphere—which swayed slightly with the tent frame in the approaching wind, making the bottle's elongated shadow sway back and forth across the table.

She hadn't waited, he saw, but was already into her dessert pudding. In the cool of the tent, she'd unbound her long, dark hair and left it hanging down her back; he thought she looked a lot younger that way. Barry poured himself a good four fingers as Edward set first a salad then a main course, roast partridge with wild rice. The partridge had dried out a bit from the wait, but Barry knew it was better for his night's sleep to start the drinking as early in the evening as possible. By this stage, Barry tended to philosophize, and he decided it would be good fun to bait her.

"Most people have their drug of choice, Ms. Kammath, whether it's caffeine, nicotine, Quadprozac, or any of the illegals. But nothing does it like booze. Primitive humans knew all about narcotic and hallucinogenic plants and fungi, but none of those have really lasted except in the fringes of the world's cultures. There's a reason alcohol has survived as the drug of choice almost everywhere: nothing else numbs you out so completely. And if you want it to do its work, you don't mix it—just send it straight down to do its job."

"To improve the nerve, no doubt. Or are you numbing a guilty conscience?"

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He was thrown off stride, but only for a moment; she was talking about something else entirely.

"Why should I need to do that?"

"Let's be blunt then." She leaned forward and fixed him with a hard stare. "If it weren't for the overriding obligation to protect my tigers, I couldn't stomach the thought of sharing a table with you. You're a killer. And you help others kill—for mere entertainment."

She had broached another of his favorite subjects. "Not mere entertainment. The hunt is elemental to our spirit. It fills a primal need—the need to acquire one's food directly through one's own efforts."

"You and your clients don't hunt for food."

He smiled, shook his head. "We don't hunt because we *need* to do it for food. But some of us actually prefer wild game to that chemical-laden, growth-hormoned flesh you buy in the market. Did you enjoy your partridge? We got permission to do a bit of shooting for our dinner, and Edward bagged these this morning on the road outside of camp. Now, do you want to go to the loo, maybe, to get rid of it? Just because it was killed by shot instead of a knife in some poultry factory?" He paused to take a long drink and refill his glass. "We are predators by nature. Our eyes both look forward in our head. For humans, at least for those of us who haven't denied our nature, hunting is a completely sensory and sensual experience. Just as it must be for your tigers."

"Actually, all this drinking does bode well for the tigers. But tell me," she said, leaning back in her chair, "when you pull the trigger, do you get an erection in your knickers?"

He paused to pour another drink. "I said sensual, not sexual. People that give hunting a sexual connotation simply don't know how else to describe it than to refer to another experience that is so primal that we lust after it with the core of our being. With our reptilian brains, you might say. And it's not just a male experience, it's the same for many women."

"I doubt you know any more about women than you do tigers, Mr. Murtoch."

"Many of my clients are women." The pressure lamp swayed hypnotically, hissing into the night, and the whiskey suddenly pushed him across the border between philosophy and stupidity. "I was married to one for ten years. Until I found her in a Kariba hotel with another man."

Now she looked up with interest. "That's when you shot *her,* I suppose."

"No." Barry took a long swallow that drained the glass, the Scotch sliding smoothly down his throat. There—he could put the bottle away now. Another hour or so to relax and have a smoke, maybe catch up on his tiger research, and he could go to his cot and fall into a deep sleep. Without having any dreams.

He watched the moths flapping around the lamp. He knew he should

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shut up, stick to his dinner, and go have that smoke in front of the campfire Edward would have going, before the heavy rains came; but it seemed far too late and his tongue stumbled on. "I could have dealt with that. It was when she told me she was leaving me for him that I should have shot her."

"Why, Barry?" she said, feigning concern. "Because you really loved her?"

"No, Emily. And this is why those tigers of yours have met their end: because I never quit, and I hate to lose."

Eight kilometers to the south, from a refugee camp, they followed fresh reports to the latest victim and found the remains of a young boy, at the edge of grasslands that had apparently once been farmed until the soil had been depleted. There was quite a bit left, actually; their approach may have interrupted the cat in its morning feed. The boy looked only seven or eight years old, and his face and upper body were untouched, so that if you only looked at that part of him it seemed as if he were merely sleeping in the grass. Barry walked off to the shade of a tree and tried to light a smokeless cigarette. His thumb kept slipping on the striker wheel. Finally he shifted the lighter to his left hand, got it lit, and looked over at Emily.

"Why don't you get out of the way, and let the trackers do their job."

She gave no sign she'd heard, didn't pause in her clinical inspection of the kill site. Barry leaned his rifle against the trunk and sat down under the tree. He took off his hat and wiped some of the sweat from his brow. Not even ten o'clock, and a man couldn't even sit down without breaking a sweat.

In a while Joshua came over to squat beside him in the shade.

"One cat, hunting by itself. A bit smaller than the track down at the river. Could be one of the near-grown cubs this time." Joshua hesitated. "Grass is still springing up where the tiger stepped." He pointed at the direction of travel.

Both men looked off at the grass, almost knee-high and growing higher every day with the nightly rains. Barry did not want to still be hunting cats here when that grass had grown head-tall and the monsoon season reached its peak. At least so far the days had been clear, even if unbearably hot.

"All right." Barry stood up. Where would the cat go? He thought about asking Emily, but she probably wouldn't answer, or tell the truth if she did.

Suddenly he had a feeling the cat was nearby, and watching them. Barry talked to the two Africans and the Indian driver briefly, then called to the biologist and climbed in the back of the rover with Joshua and Robert.

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Emily looked amused as she got in the front seat. "Are you just surveying kill sites, Mr. Murtoch?"

The rover went around a bend, half a kilometer. The driver looked around and Barry nodded. As the rover slowed the three men in the back seat jumped out.

"What the—?" Emily twisted in her seat, but the rover was accelerating down the trail. Barry waited until the sound of the engine and the woman's arguing with the driver faded away. With hand signals he sent the trackers into the brush and grass on either side of the road, then he went into the uphill side, climbing to circle back toward the kill while remaining downwind. He had not gone a hundred meters uphill before having to pause to wipe away the sweat pouring down his face. His profession had kept him in reasonable condition over the years, his legs and back still strong, but layers of flab had nonetheless accreted around his torso with advancing middle age. In this heat the fat around his belly seemed to liquefy, drooping and shifting like a sack of water hanging from his neck.

He had crossed over the hill and could see the area of the kill site when he heard the shot. Robert and Joshua had passed the end of the road, walking parallel, approaching the kill, both with their guns raised but neither firing again. There was no wind, but Barry saw the grass rippling, then stop. He raised Joshua on his watch.

"Something moved about five hundred meters from my position, in a direct line between us. Stay spread out and come toward me. And hope he runs my way."

Barry moved as fast as he could go quietly down the hill, the wet sticky blades of grass gripping at his legs. A bush midway downslope would break his outline, while giving a good view of the grass below. He sat down behind the bush and waited in the heat, hearing the flies buzzing in his ears but resisting the urge to slap or shake his head. Like many animals, the big cats could see movement quite well but had great difficulty spotting a stationary human.

The trackers were closing in and the grass flowed again, coming toward him, rippling in a windless sea. He took a rest with his elbows on his knees and willed his muscles to relax; but he was still breathing hard from the climb and the scope reticule twitched in time to his heartbeat. Still, all he could see was the rippling grass a hundred meters away.

Then two eyes were staring out of the grass. Cat eyes for sure, blazing even in the full afternoon sun. Something twitched—an ear—and for an instant Murtoch thought he could distinguish the outline of the head. Too far for a brain shot—where was the shoulder? The eyes disappeared and he lost every vestige of the cat. Nothing but the grass, now still. He could hear the trackers approaching, their legs swishing in the grass and now and then the clump of a sole on a hard bit of ground.

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The grass rippled again, angling toward him, and Murtoch moved the scope to cover an opening where the cover grew sparse and low. He took half a breath, held it, and disconnected his mind from the link between eye and hand. The grass rippled forward, then circumvented the clearing, grass rippling there along the edge—a sense of movement, of catfeet near the ground.

Murtoch had no target and raised his head from the scope. And the cat caught even that slight motion. The blazing eyes swung full toward him—then the grass itself seemed to be running, bounding along the edge of the clearing.

Shaken and sighting too quickly, Murtoch fired high. But it was a lucky shot, taking the tiger at the top of a jump. The cat was roaring and still making for the end of the clearing, dragging its collapsed hindquarters. Murtoch worked the bolt and fired again. The cat went down, the grass thrashed wildly, then all was still.

Murtoch stood up, watching carefully. He couldn't see the cat anymore, and the grass had ceased all movement. The trackers were closing in, rifles at ready, knowing better than to hurry blindly through the grass. Murtoch slung the Sako and started down the hill. Impossible to believe that that had been a young cat; it had used the grass for concealment as well as the most experienced hunter.

The trackers approached to within twenty yards and held their guns ready and waited. Anything dangerous in the hunt was first for the professional hunter. Murtoch went down and walked cautiously toward the mound of striped fur. The tiger's muscles quivered in a sign of death, eyes open and staring, but Barry touched his rifle barrel to one fixed eyeball before he relaxed. The first lucky shot had broken the cat's spine midway down the back, the next going through its chest. He couldn't tell if it was one of the cubs—it looked plenty big to him. He lifted one of the hind legs and saw the cat was male.

A dead lion usually looked scruffy and slightly disreputable—tick- and flea-ridden, bared patches of fur and scarred from fights with other lions, its mane tangled and dirty and the whole thing usually disappointing to the client. This cat was more like a leopard, beautiful even in death, its rich fur tawny orange with deep black stripes. It had just started to grow out on the sides of its face the ruff that marked the male tiger, just as the mane distinguished the lion from the lioness. Joshua and Robert were congratulating him, thumping him on the back, then went to marvel at a cat like they had never seen.

The rover pulled up with a slight squeal of brakes and a gaseous belch of the engine. "You bastard," Emily said. "You left the dart gun behind in the car. You had no intention of even trying to capture him alive, did you?"

"You're absolutely right," Barry told her. He'd noticed her reference to

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"him"; once again, she had known which cat it was from measurements at the kill. And hadn't bothered to pass the information on to anyone else. "Tranquilizer guns have limited range, even less accuracy. If the dosage isn't right or the dart falls out, then all you've got is an angry animal. I did indeed have no intention of taking my men into the grass after a man-eater with one of your biologist's toys. All those live-capture methods failed—that's why I was given leave to kill these animals. And all I require from you is to stay the bloody hell out of my way."

"Boss," Joshua called. "This cat has some older injuries, maybe a month old."

Emily approached the dead cat and Barry followed. He could see tears welling in her eyes. Well, so she does have feelings. For the cats, anyway.

The cat had nearly healed wounds on the shoulder and the back of its neck, red scar tissue barely visible under a short, fine layer of re-grown hair.

"Doesn't look like a gunshot," Barry said. "I doubt that even a shotgun would make wounds like that."

Emily felt around the wound and pushed into it, then shook her head. "So that's how they got out!" Her face showed the connection her brain made, a recognition of something important. When she realized all the men were staring at her, she got up and started toward the rover. Barry stepped directly in her path.

"All right, I've had enough of these games."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You are going to explain exactly what you meant by that remark. Or else I'm going to tell the park director you're being obstructive, and unless he removes you from my camp, I'm packing the whole thing in and going back to Africa. Since I've already managed to bring down one of these man-eaters, I'm betting he'll side with me. So if you want to have any influence at all in how this hunt continues, you'd better start talking."

She stared ahead for another moment, then gave up.

"The park has a buried electric containment cable around its perimeter. After the tigers are born, we anaesthetize them and implant a small transceiver unit in the back of their necks, under the skin, against the cervical vertebrae. The transceiver lets us know their exact position at any time, and is also sensitive to the field from the buried cable. If a tiger gets too close, the unit causes first an unpleasant tingling, then pain. Eventually, if one went close enough to the cable it would paralyze him."

"I'd think an ordinary steel fence would have worked better," Barry said, "to keep the cats in and the people out."

"Years ago the department tried surrounding the park with a high steel fence. But the poachers working this area were always cutting holes in it. The buried cable has always worked perfectly. It doesn't keep out

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someone who wants to walk in, but the gates do stop the poachers from driving into the park."

"So why didn't the cable keep these cats in?"

"I'm speculating," she said. "Shortly before the three tigers escaped, we had an incident. A tiger was injured by a poacher's mine set inside the park. A guard heard the bomb go off and found fresh blood and bits of fur at the site. At the time we didn't know which cat had been hurt, but it must have been this one here. Later, flying over the site, we saw human remains—so one of the tigers must have killed the poacher when he came back to check. Anyway, tigers lick their wounds—their saliva is a strong antiseptic—and mothers groom their cubs, even when they're nearly adults. Maybe the blast exposed the transceiver unit, and the tigress felt it with her tongue and pulled it out."

"Are you telling me the mother extracted the unit with her teeth?"

She shrugged and looked steadily at him.

"Hold on," he continued. "All three of the cats got outside the containment cable. So they all must have lost their units."

"That's right."

"You're saying they dug them out of each other's necks? Just so they could escape the confinement fence, I suppose."

She shrugged and looked away. "I told you I was speculating. The tigers wouldn't have been aware of the transceivers before that incident. This cub has old wounds at the implant site, and the unit is now gone. Reach your own conclusions."

Despite the heat, Barry felt a momentary chill run down his back. He shook his head. No animal could make that kind of connection. "I don't buy it. Someone must have cut them out, after tranquilizing the cats."

"Doesn't look clean enough for a knife cut," Joshua told him.

"That's fine," Emily said. "You answer your own questions, then." She pushed past him, started again toward the rover, then froze.

While they had been talking a group of nomads, refugees from the years of drought that plagued the northern regions of the sub-continent, had evidently followed the sound of the shots down the road, and were now coming along the tracks left by the rover in the grass. Men, women, and children, wearing rags, carrying their scant belongings in old seed bags on their backs. As if in mockery of the plight that had sent them from their home villages, heavy clouds stacked the horizon behind them, presaging an early afternoon storm.

Some of the nomads stopped at the site where the dead boy lay. The wailing of several women, probably the boy's mother and relatives, came over the grass. Then there was a flurry of activity around the kill site, an explosion of some flammable liquid, high flames and thick black smoke reaching to the sky.

Emily snorted. "They believe the dead boy will come back as a tiger,

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unless they burn the body right away." She gave Barry an innocent look. "Of course, in certain remote villages they say that tigers are only inhabited by the souls of cuckolded husbands."

The first wave of nomads approached in utter silence, save for the scuff of their bare or sandaled feet in the grass and creak of the wheels of a cart hauled by two men. In Africa the local villagers would be whooping and dancing to celebrate the death of a big predator. These people just stood there, forming a ring around the carcass, a strange intent look on their faces.

"We'd better get it loaded up," Murtoch said to the trackers. "Before they mutilate it." He had visions of them chopping it to pieces, either in revenge or to use in some charm or medicine.

"Boss, I don't think they're here to mutilate," Joshua said. "We've seen that look before, at home. In 2014, the year the Zambezi dried to a trickle. Remember what it looks like?"

Hunger. Murtoch knew it now, in the nomads' faces. The hunger that could lead you to eat anything—insects, leaves, your shoes if you had any. Things a lot worse than cat.

Emily looked perplexed. "They want to eat it? To Hindus, this kind of meat is considered polluted, even for an untouchable."

"Maybe not to starving Hindus," Barry replied.

The nomads had completely surrounded the hunters and their vehicle, fifty or sixty of them and still more coming across the grass. Murtoch told his trackers to take only the skin. They took out their knives and worked fast, while Murtoch stood watch.

"We need proof for the government," he said, not knowing whether the nomads could understand his English. "We'll leave it for you once we've taken the skin." Without being asked, Emily translated his words into Hindi. But the nomads looked back with blank empty eyes, eyes that became full only when they turned to look upon the meat.

Barry looked around at the creak and belching purr of another rover coming rapidly across the grass.

"Uh-oh. Those are poachers." Emily ran to the rover for her smart-rifle.

The poacher's rover came in fast and skidded to a stop, bumping aside several nomads who failed to scramble out of the way. It looked a bit larger and heavier than the park vehicle, and had a covered top. Four men got out, three Indians and one who looked Asian and was quite tall, Chinese maybe. All carried smart-rifles as up-to-date as Emily's.

"God, they're this brazen?" Barry said. In Africa every professional hunter, backed by government authority, carried on a constant war against the poachers, who would otherwise decimate a hunting concession. Maybe in India no one had a direct economic interest in protecting the animals.

"They know we can't call in air support, with a storm building up,"

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Emily replied, bitterly. "And God knows, maybe they just bribed whoever's on the park radio not to be listening. I'd better try to talk to them."

After an exchange in Hindi, she turned to look at Barry. "Their Chinese leader says to thank you for shooting the tiger, and they're going to take it. He says everyone can tell the tigers aren't evil spirits now, since one has been killed by a bullet. We can thank you for giving them that knowledge."

Joshua and Robert had stopped skinning and taken up their rifles as soon as they'd heard Emily identify these men as poachers—both had helped Barry track down and arrest poachers in Zimbabwe many times over the years. Now, one of the Indian poachers pushed past the trackers and grabbed a hind leg of the tiger. Removing his left hand from the rifle's foregrip, Barry took three quick steps and shoved the poacher hard enough to knock him to the ground. In the same motion, Barry extended the Sako to point straight at the chest of the Chinese.

"Tell them we're very sorry," he called over his shoulder to Emily, "but they can't have it, and should be on their way."

The Chinese returned a steady look after listening to Emily, then nodded, took out his wallet, and named a sum that shocked Barry, that would exceed the total fee the Indians would pay him if his safari company stayed on the job for a month. Emily waited for Barry's response, probably hoping he'd take the money and go back to Africa.

He leaned forward slightly without letting the barrel waver in the slightest and said, "No," very loudly and clearly.

The poacher understood that much English. He put away the wallet and there was no more talk of bribes. But neither did the poachers make any effort to get in their rover, and the trackers could not resume the skinning until they did so. It looked like a three-way stand-off, with four armed individuals on each of two sides and the nomads making up for their lack of arms with sheer numbers. The poachers did not want to give up the skin, but agreed to do so after being promised the bones and internal organs, including the genitals, which they would sell in Asian black markets. They seemed unconcerned about the nomads, but neither did they have any use for the meat or intestinal tract. So a bargain was made, and the trackers resumed their work.

Barry was not happy. He had never before compromised with poachers, but neither did he want to get anyone killed, especially Joshua and Robert, who had been with him since he'd started in the business and were the only family he had left. He could see that Emily was equally upset.

"What do the nomads want with the intestines?" he asked, distracted, but still covering the poachers.

"To eat, I suppose," Emily told him. "And you worry about a few tigers culling their numbers."

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Skinned, the cat looked smaller and lost all its beauty, its eyes bulging and teeth bared in a permanent grimace, indeed nothing more than meat and sinew on bone. The trackers folded the skin carefully and jumped in the back of the rover. As they climbed into their rover, the poachers began boning out the carcass, tossing the scraps of meat to the nomads.

"Which side gets the stomach contents?" Murtoch said, as the driver shifted into gear.

In camp the African staff wanted to celebrate and re-live the hunt well into evening. When Barry was finally able to extract himself, he raised the park director, carefully placing his whiskey glass outside the view of the notebook's video pick-up. Ghouri was elated at the news, then critical about not recovering the whole cat, and finally smugly satisfied as the circumstances were explained.

"I believe I have located the reference of which you inquired," Ghouri said. "It is most incredible. In the Kumaon district near Tibet, shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, there was known to have been a man-eater the English called the Champawat tigress. This unholy creature consumed 436 human beings—the world record for feline man-eating—and perhaps more whose demise was undocumented. Of course, in those colonial days the British feared a revolt, and common Indians were never allowed firearms. The hill-people most cruelly afflicted with this beast believed she was a supernatural being and called her 'Shaitan.' A national park in this region was named to honor the British citizen who hunted down and slew this tigress in 1907, Colonel Edward James Corbett."

Of course. Corbett's book, *Man-eaters of Kumaon,* had been a classic reference text recommended to Barry when he'd begun hunting leopards. Corbett, he recalled, had been born in Kumaon and grew up a phenomenal hunter and woodsman. Over the course of thirty years, usually hunting them down all by himself, he'd put an end to the careers of ten man-eating leopards and tigers which had killed something like 1500 people between them.

Then, in late middle-age, after watching some English friends shoot an unnecessarily huge quantity of waterfowl—*ducks,* of all things—Corbett had hung up his guns and quit hunting for good. Asked why, he'd simply said that he personally didn't want to kill anymore. Barry, who had always admired the man's character and skill, had never understood that change of heart.

He should have paid more attention to the tiger-hunting sections of Corbett's book. He would have to call it up on his notebook and try to reread it in camp, when he had time.

Ghouri continued. "You asked whether tigers can swim. There are old reports of them swimming out to sea and attacking people in boats. Though they are said not to like getting their faces wet."

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It still didn't explain why the two dead guards wouldn't have seen or heard a swimming tiger. Barry shook his head and returned to the main subject. "Why would the biologists name one of these cats here after that Champawat man-eater?"

"Do you have to ask?" The director smiled thinly. "Although this one still has much catching up to do."

Murtoch wasn't satisfied; Emily had spoken the name in . . . recognition. Which meant she must have named it *before* it escaped from the park and started killing people.

"Mr. Ghouri, when we talked before you said these cats have killed sixty-four people 'not counting poachers.' What exactly does that mean?"

The director looked at him steadily. "Poaching is illegal, so we are not concerned with how many of them may have been killed within park boundaries, before the cats escaped."

"Were there a lot of them?"

"Poaching, it has always been a serious problem in Ranthambhore. Poachers have damaged the populations of every animal species in the park. Most unfortunately, the bears and sloths we believe are exterminated—their gall bladders can be sold for large sums. But the poacher who himself kills the tiger is a wealthy man indeed. The animal's every part is worth fabulous sums in the markets of the Far East. The bones alone, ground up for Chinese medicine, would bring millions of rupees. For years, we could not hire enough guards to protect the tigers from poachers."

"Yes, I've just met some of your local poachers." Barry said. "Look, my men aren't here to fight poachers. How about assigning some more guards to this area, so we can get on with the job you're paying us to do?"

"Mr. Murtoch, park guards number eight among these tigers' victims. Regrettably, twice that number have quit their employment or call in sick every day. But I can post one of our army reserve helicopters in your camp—tomorrow morning when I will arrive to inspect that skin. Be sure and take good care of it—it is the property of the State of Rajasthan."

Murtoch downed another drink, and poured a third, before going out to find the trackers. It was not their regular role, but Joshua and Robert were fleshing and salting the hide with good cheer; two more cats down, and they could go home. Barry too, out of this insufferable heat. He checked their work, not wanting the park director complaining about a spoiled hide, which would probably go to decorate his own office.

Passing the cook tent he could see the meal was nearly ready, so he took a seat at the table, holding his glass steadily in one hand and resting the other on his belly. The whiskey and day's accomplishment had put him in a magnanimous mood, and when Emily did not come at the cook's call, Barry went to her tent himself to fetch her. Her lamp was out in the evening dusk, and he heard her cot creak as she rose to come to the open door flaps.

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"Dinner's ready."

"I'm not hungry."

He couldn't see her face, but her voice had that nasal, congested sound of someone who had been crying. She had not sealed and cooled her tent, but had simply turned on a bug field across the open door. The field rippled invisibly between them, raising the hair on his forearm, and Barry could hear the snap and pop of bugs flying into it. Some of the mosquitoes and flies were landing on him, he realized. So without invitation, he went in.

She didn't react at all as he thought she would, hostile, sexually defensive of her bedroom space, but instead merely turned to go sit on her cot. Barry watched her slump forward, lean on her hands, the skin and curve of one breast gleaming out of the shadows of the tent, in contrast to her sun-browned face and arms. She might actually make a spirited bounce on that cot. Catch her in the right mood. Same old story, Barry, your timing with women is always off. Right now she acts like she just lost a child.

"Believe it or not, I know how you feel," he told her.

"How could you?" The combined anguish and derision cracked her voice at the end. As it faded, that sound left such a hole in the space of the tent that he rushed to fill it.

"Seventeen years ago, I was a contractor in the U.S.—Chicago. I took my family on vacation to Africa. Africa—the name was magic to me from the time I was a kid. But it was Africa that took my son. The only child I ever fathered." He closed and rubbed his eyes. Why was he doing this?

But his tongue went on. "I talked my wife into going on safari, along the Zambezi escarpment in northern Zimbabwe. Not a hunt. I didn't even know how to shoot a rifle in those days. The safari company, which is the one I ended up buying, did photographic trips as well as hunts. And our guide didn't know it, but a leopard in the area had recently turned to man-eating, and one morning it came into camp and took Ben as he was coming out of the loo."

His voice wasn't holding up well. God, what a stupid thing to do. Start on that, with her. It was the damned whiskey again.

"So that's why you hate them, so much," she said, low, as if to herself; and he said, with simultaneous breath, "He was eight years old."

There was silence a moment, as each waited for the other to go on. The momentum of the whiskey made him speak first.

"It was a big tom, eight-footer. It carried him right out of the camp. We heard later it had killed four other people."

"Was that before you and your wife split up?"

He nodded.

"Your child was the only thing holding you together? Or did you blame each other for his death?"

"There wasn't any connection." Let's put an end to this, he thought,

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and took a long swallow from the glass, draining it, enough maybe to bring back the bright edge at least. Let's move on. Safer to examine her pain.

"Look, I know you've lost one of your tigers. But think about the human lives we've saved, by stopping a man-eater that's been preying on your people."

"My people?" Emily gave a laugh that sounded more bitter than amused. "The caste system was officially abolished in India decades ago, but prejudice against the lower castes still pervades this society. My mother was an English social worker; my father belonged to a caste barely a step up from an untouchable. I was fortunate to have been schooled in my mother's country. To 'my people,' as you call them, I'm a low-caste half-breed. If I didn't work for the United Nations I'd have no opportunity or chance to make a difference."

"But what kind of difference?" Barry asked. "Did you even take a look at that little boy today?"

"You won't persuade me with appeals to sympathy. Project Restore-the-Tiger is my life's work, and it has the official support of the Indian government, as well as the international community. *Of course* one of the trade-offs to having wild predators in the environment is that they might take an occasional human. But believe me, what animals might do to people is nothing compared to what people do to each other."

"You'd feel differently if they were eating you, or someone you loved."

"I *wouldn't* feel differently. I'd give my life for these tigers."

Barry realized his glass was empty, but he didn't get up to leave yet. "I was hoping we could cooperate. I don't care how I finish this job. I'd still be willing to consider live-capture, if you'd only provide enough information to help make it work."

She shook her head. "I don't trust you, Murtoch. Your kind helped wipe them out before. But I will tell you this much: this is the world's last chance to keep the wild tiger. There were less than a dozen animals left in Ranthambhore by the turn of the century, and that remnant population was doomed, even if the poachers left them alone. You'd need a few hundred animals, in a park larger than anything left in India, to maintain genetic viability.

"So we had to intervene, to supplement the gene pool. We used the best genetic material we could find, which resulted in an animal that was as large or larger than the extinct Siberian sub-species. This tigress that escaped was one of a number that we raised ourselves—but never as a visible presence. We used mechanical tigers, a few real tigers borrowed from zoos, and even holo simulations, without ever letting them relate to a human being as other than a threat or . . . and now this tigress has been the first of that group to breed in the wild and successfully raise her litter to adulthood. There. Does that help?"

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"The tigress being the one you call Shaitan," he said. "You were going to say 'other than a threat or as *prey*,' weren't you?"

She looked up with such a start that Barry knew he had got it right.

"More than a hundred years ago there was a man-eater the Kumaon people called Shaitan," he said. "Were you going for her record?"

"I think your dinner is getting cold, Mr. Murtoch."

As usual, the antelope backstrap was perfectly prepared, the flesh as tender as the best lean beef, and Edward had opened a good burgundy to go with the meal. But Barry, dining alone, didn't taste any of it. When the wine was gone he went back to the whiskey, going well over the edge, the amount he could drink and still function normally. He should never have started talking with her about his son. It was all a long time ago and should just stay buried, and he never liked to think about it because that always made him remember the things he could have done or not done that might have made a difference. But the whiskey could keep him from remembering, just as it kept away the dream.

Late in the night he found himself stumbling around the camp, from one corner to the next, swaying, drinking straight from the bottle now because somewhere he had left his glass. A full moon had risen over the hills, bathing the open areas of the camp in silvered light, silvered light also seeping around the shadow edges of the tents and forest. The cicadas were singing a mating song, and the branches of trees swayed with the approach of the night's rainstorm. The air felt stifling and hot as a furnace. Too tired to look for his tent, Barry felt his legs sagging, leaned against one of the privy poles, and slid to the ground. The bottle tilted vertical and his throat accepted the last of the whiskey.

When he lowered his head she had come out of the wall of forest shadows as if materialized in a dream. She slowly swung her head and it looked enormous and for an instant moonlight blazed in her eyes. Then she moved toward him, flowing across the ground in one continuous unhurried motion, her coat showing burnished gold between the dark longitudinal stripes and her torso as wide and solid as an oak barrel. She held her head low and tail high and straight back like a staff as she came, and all Barry could do was set the empty bottle on the ground.

She stopped flowing and crouched beside him. He felt her sniff at his leg and exhale across his ankle. Then she stood erect and her truly enormous head swung up close enough for Barry to see twin moons reflected in her eyes. The faintest brush of her leg against his trousers as she stepped across him, turned, raised her tail high.

A warm spray of urine hit the pole beside his face, splashing blindingly in his eyes, the pungent smell making him choke. He wiped his face, blinking away the urine and tears, and when he could see again he found her flowing along the ground toward Emily's tent. Barry could not move. He knew he should be trying to get to the rifle in his tent. But he still felt,

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despite the cooling wetness and sting and stink of the urine, as if he were in a dream.

Something made him turn his head and there at the edge of the forest, from whence Shaitan had come, a second, slightly smaller cat sat on its haunches just inside the shadows. The second cub, the female. Watching, waiting for her mother. A huge moth flitted in front of the cub, distracting her attention briefly. From every tree around the camp and throughout the forest came the high fiddling song of cicadas even above the rush of the approaching storm. The light seemed to drop, and looking up, Barry saw the moon being swallowed by a thick bank of clouds coming over the hills.

The tigress had reached Emily's tent, but didn't pause long at the entrance before moving on to the next tent, Barry's own. Here she paused a bit longer, and went in half her own length before withdrawing. Then on to the tent that Edward shared with two of the camp hands; again, a cursory pause. Then the trackers' tent. She went in, all the way.

The tent sides bulged, whooshed out by the plunge of her swift movement, and a loud choking groan silenced the nearby cicadas and other insects. It was a sound a man might make in a nightmare, in mingled terror and embarrassment. The near side of the tent bulged even further, thrashed, and then came a scream in a different voice, a voice that didn't sound human but animal-like, as if made by an antelope or monkey perhaps, dying in agony.

The tigress's hindquarters appeared at the entrance, feet digging in, pulling, something inside still thrashing and shaking the whole tent. A pole snapped, fabric tore, and the tigress was free of the tent, turning back toward the forest, holding something dark that thrashed and screamed again in that keening antelope cry.

She loped toward him, head held high, neck arched, holding gently but with implacable firmness between her jaws, like a retriever fetching a duck, the torso of a man. The man was being carried face up by the small of his back, his legs kicking, arms beating the tigress about the head and whose only response was to lay back her ears and close her eyes. The cat moved in awful silence except for its victim's continued keening, and as the apparition swung by him, Barry, still in dreamlike immobility, saw the inverted face of Joshua, his mouth open, eyes wide and unseeing, pupils reflecting the last of the fading moonlight.

The shadows along the trees had deepened and Barry wasn't sure exactly when both cats had disappeared, nor when the dream had ended and he'd reached his feet. The entire camp had risen in a furor of voices and lights showing inside the tentwalls. Emily was the first to reach him with a light, which she shined in his face. It was only the third or fourth inquiry, perhaps aided by the onslaught of huge raindrops, that brought him back fully to the world of the quick. Without a word of response, he ran for the rifle and flashlight in his tent.

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In the forest furnace of night, Barry fell over fallen trees and walked into live ones and tore himself with thorns and thistles, while the storm raged and deluged drops as hot as blood. He kept calling "Joshua" over and over, as if his friend might have pried himself free of those gigantic jaws and was now simply lost among the trees. Stumbling on, branches tearing at his face and arms . . . until near dawn he fell panting against a tree, his rifle in the mud, closing his eyes . . . and the nightmare returned.

The hunter has told him to wait in the rover, but Barry marches ever on the heels of the young tracker, Joshua, who still works under the wing of his own father, in the lead. The winter-dried grasses and burrs scrape his bare legs and ankles, and in barren patches of ground the powdery choking dust rises with every footfall. The dust on the bare ground shows where the leopard has walked. Barry has stopped asking, because the others just shake their heads without reply. It seems he stumbles on interminably, but at last they come to the edge of a forest.

The trackers stop and look at the hunter, who regards Barry for a moment. The trackers squat on their heels to rest.

"Go back and wait," the hunter says. "We'll be along soon enough."

"Give me a gun," Barry says.

"Sorry. You might shoot one of us by accident."

He can tell they think the cat probably hasn't gone much further. The hunter sends the trackers on ahead. Farther along the edge of the trees, a kudu snorts and goes crashing through the brush. The hunter lights a cigarette and waits. Barry peers and paces. The trackers come back and squat and look off to where the sun has started to sink behind the escarpment. Then Joshua looks at him.

Barry breaks a branch off a dead tree and takes to the trail, now marked clearly by the feet of the men in the dead, brown grass. A hand touches his shoulder and he whirls, club held high, backing away, cocking the club back again and again, while they harry him like jackals, imploring him to stop, until the shadows of the trees envelope him, and turning, he lets the last shred of unreasoning hope flee away as he sees hanging from a fork in the branch high above a pale slender leg, bare and stripped of the trousers. Then he lets the hands catch him and drag him back, as his world implodes.

"We have to leave him up there," the hunter keeps saying, "so the killer will come back."

Joshua goes and brings the rover in from the road. Leaning against the fender, Barry smokes one cigarette after another just to give his hands something to do. It is well after dark when he hears the shot. Joshua starts the engine and Barry climbs in. Shadows caper and leap as the vehicle bounces and groans over the rough terrain. Two figures that are not shadows grow in the headlights along the forest edge, waving their arms.

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"We got him!" Joshua's father calls.

Joshua kills the engine, gets out. Barry stays in the front seat. After a while brush snaps, there comes the thud of feet and the voices of men under exertion. The rear gate bangs open and Barry hears the slither of fur across the steel floor. Then the rustle of another, tarpaulin-covered object sliding in beside the dead cat. Rich takes the driver's seat, the trackers get in the back, and they start up again.

Barry hears his son's voice calling from the back of the rover all the way back to camp. The voice keeps saying, over and over, "Why, Daddy? Why?" Growing fainter as they approach the camp's fire, fading off until it seems to be only the tread of the tires singing on the road, why why why why . . . and he sees Karen's face running toward them in the headlights.

The birds had been calling in the trees for some time before the sound of the helicopter awoke him fully. The helicopter and the two others that followed it at least gave him a fix on the camp. He was scratched and bleeding, bug-bitten, and soaked from the rain that had fallen throughout most of the night, and he got sick twice while walking toward camp. When he arrived the three helicopters sat in a canefield out near the road, flanked by a group of local villagers who seemed upset to see their field turned into a landing zone. A crowd of well-dressed people of various races surrounded the tiger skin, which had been stretched out under a tarp. Only Edward was watching for him, and Barry shook his head.

Edward told him that Robert was dead, bitten right through both sides of his head. Most of the people were with the international news media, summoned by word of a tiger's slaughter that Emily had posted on the Net. Barry knew she had always been good at manipulating the media in her tigers' interests. The media people wouldn't be interested in Robert or Joshua or any of the other victims; they probably just wanted videos of the tiger skin. Barry recognized Director Ghouri in their midst, involved in a heated discussion with Emily while the vid-cams rolled. Ghouri looked like he was coming out on the losing end. Everyone was too busy following the argument to notice Barry's arrival.

He went to the tent, changed his clothes, and packed his gear quickly. Rifle, twenty rounds of ammo, pack, food and provisions for a week. He paused to look at the remaining bottles in the case, but now he felt sick enough to be able to leave them behind. Maybe that's what makes an alcoholic, why his yearly blood check looked worse every year, to the point where he'd probably need a new liver in another ten years: no matter how much he drank, it didn't make him feel bad enough to want to leave it alone. Until now.

When he went out the news conference was breaking up, Emily heading toward her tent and the reporters all taking refuge in the air-condi-

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tioned dining tent, where they'd doubtless make Edward's day miserable with their demands. Ghouri saw him come out and started to call for him, but the villagers caught up with the director, complaining loudly and pointing at their damaged crop. Barry followed Emily into her tent and sat down. He still felt so sick he could barely raise his head to look her in the eye.

"I just want to know one thing. How smart did you make them?"

"What do you mean?"

He sighed. "Okay, I'll go back to the start of this trail. You've got a park boundary that has no barrier to humans. Not enough guards and no other security measures, except gates to keep out vehicles. Yet, tiger parts are worth a fortune, and the poachers are operating with such impunity outside the park that we had to bargain with them to escape without a fight. So why are there any tigers left alive in Ranthambhore?"

She shrugged. "The locals think the park animals are weretigers. And frankly, we've done everything we can to encourage that belief."

"Funny, it never used to stop them. According to the director, a decade ago he couldn't hire enough guards to keep out the poachers. But I'll bet if we checked the records *after* your new breeding program, we'd find a lot of people, like the poacher with the mine, who went into the park and never came out."

"No one keeps records of park trespassers who get lost or are killed by wildlife."

He shook his head, wincing at the pain. "Last night your tigress came into camp and went straight for the only two men who had the smell of her cub on them. That looked a lot to me like revenge. I don't think there's any natural cat that smart, and I'm sorry, but I don't believe in weretigers."

She studied him. "Well, Mr. Murtoch, I guess with your trackers dead, your little safari is over. And you'll pardon my saying so, but you don't look fit to go anywhere past the nearest detox center. But you're right, even when the park had two hundred guards, we were losing tigers to poaching. Bribery was an issue, but even honest guards couldn't be everywhere. This wasn't just an Indian problem. Poachers wiped out the Javan, Sumatran, and Caspian tigers before the turn of the century, and the remaining sub-species soon thereafter. The wild tiger has been driven to the endless night of extinction everywhere but here. So we had to find some way for our animals to protect themselves."

"I thought so," he said. "They're bioenhanced, aren't they?"

She nodded.

"That's against the law, in all but a few outcast nations. India, I presume, not included in that category."

"I'll deny this conversation," she told him. "The few records that exist will be destroyed at the first sign of a leak. There's only a handful of peo-

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ple who know about it, and they're as dedicated to the tiger's survival as I am."

"Tigers? These aren't tigers we're talking about. You've created a new species. A monster."

"You're wrong. They could breed with normal tigers and produce genetically viable offspring. The enhancement is even a dominant trait. And if we *are* on the verge of a new species, so what? Tigers and genus *homo* kept pace with each other, in evolutionary terms, for a few million years—the ancient Indians believed that tigers and humans are descended from the same mother. We aren't their favored prey, because with our greater intelligence they had cause to fear and respect us. But we were part of their natural prey. They ate a few of us, we killed a few of them—and neither gained any significant evolutionary advantage. Until modern technology allowed us to accomplish their extermination."

"So doesn't that simply mean we've won the evolutionary game? Lots of other species have lost out, as part of the natural order."

"Not like this. If human technology and populations had advanced at normal evolutionary rates, they would have kept pace with us. Don't you see? We've just given them what evolution would have done, given a normal chance."

"So I'll go back to my first question: how smart did you make them?"

She took a breath. "Mostly, we enlarged their cerebral hemispheres and increased neurological densities there. There was glandular balance that had to be maintained too, but I wasn't directly involved in the genetic engineering. We tried to give them what humans have: the ability to reason, to learn from the past, to foresee the consequences of actions, and to make future plans. Also, the so-called higher emotions, like love, self-sacrifice—or hate and revenge. The main reason we made them larger than the native Indian tiger—and slightly decreased the gestation period—was so the females wouldn't have trouble giving birth to cubs with larger crania. But we expect the cubs to stay with the mother longer anyway, since they'll have a lot more to learn—like human children. Shaitan's cub is three years old, a late teenager in human terms."

"Are you telling me these cats are as smart as human beings?"

"Maybe. Probably, in a different way. We built on a non-human foundation, and haven't yet found a direct way to measure it, to actually comprehend cat intelligence with our human intellect."

"Great. So how do we figure out where they'll go next?"

"Oh, we know that. One of the helicopters spotted them on the road this morning—crossing into the park. Which is why I don't mind telling you about it."

"Why would they go back there now?"

"I have a theory." She opened her notebook and called up a map of the park. "It would explain why they left in the first place. See, in blue are

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outlined the ranges of the dominant male tigers, and the females' ranges are marked in red. The females' ranges can overlap the males', and to a lesser extent, each other's. But the males are quite territorial and will fight any other adult male that intrudes on their range. I think Shaitan left the park, once she could, to protect her male cub. To find him a new territory of his own. And now that he's dead, she's probably concerned about her remaining cub and heading for the security of her home range."

"Which range is hers?"

"It runs from the southern edge of the park here, north to the old fortress." She pointed to the red zone along the western half of the park's largest lake.

"All right." He stood up.

"Are you going somewhere?"

"I'm not leaving Joshua out there in the forest. I'll follow them as long as I have to."

"By yourself? In the shape you're in?"

"I'll manage."

"I'm afraid you can't. They're absolutely protected inside the park."

He went out without responding.

"I'll stop you, if you try to go in there," she called.

Barry threw his gear in one of the rovers and drove off. According to reports, even the main road to Jaipur was flooding in several places; the old park roads were probably worse. He turned north off the main highway onto the gravel and dirt road that had once provided tourist access to the park. The road climbed a hill for a while and was fine, but a small pond in the first dip caused muddy water to swirl in through the door cracks.

He drove slowly, watching the road surface; Murtoch was no tracker but the mud made it easy, and after a few kilometers he spotted two sets of pugmarks the size of saucers emerging from the brush and walking up the road. A flock of birds seemed quite interested in a particular section of a ravine a few hundred yards from the road. He back-tracked the cats and found what remained of Joshua scattered in a clearing there, on one side of the ravine. Barry bundled the remains in a tarp he had brought for this purpose, and when he reached the road he laid the bundle in the back of the second rover that had just arrived to park behind his own. Emily got out of the driver's side.

"Okay, so you found him." When he ignored her she followed him to his rover. "This isn't a personal vendetta, Murtoch. You've no authority to follow them into the park."

"I was hired to hunt down and kill *three* man-eaters," he told her. "Without those transceivers, what's to stop these two cats from coming out again and eating more people, next week or next month?"

"That's not your concern. And if you have any doubts, you'd better lis-

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ten to this." She snapped her notebook open and called up a very unhappy-looking park director.

"The news media say that India has allowed trophy hunting of its last wild tigers. They make *me* to look responsible! They ask *me* what the prime minister will do if foreign governments claim that India violates CITES II and other animal protection treaties. So, unfortunately, it cannot be permitted for you to follow the tigers into the park."

"The trail's hot," Barry replied. "If we quit now, we'll have a hell of a time finding them again, especially in this weather. The job needs to be finished, now or never."

"Very well, it is my most regrettable duty to say you may consider yourself discharged then. Of course, to be paid for your time and expenses to date."

Barry closed the notebook and flung it into the ravine. He chambered a round, stood back, and fired it through the tank of Emily's rover. The methane emptied in a rush of foul gas that left a patch of frost on the fender. His rearview mirror showed Emily climbing down for the notebook as he drove up the road.

A biologist's theory was fine, but Barry's experience, and all the literature left by those who had hunted before him, said that once a big cat comprehended humans as prey, it would surely kill again. Unless stopped for good. But you couldn't expect local politicians and bureaucrats, whose outlook never exceeded their next election or appointment, to acknowledge this simple fact.

He slowed the vehicle as he approached the massive steel gate that blocked the old park road. Set deeply in concrete footings, it looked like it could stop a tank. He fished in his shirt pocket and found the key card Ghouri had lent him. A good thing no one had yet thought to change the code to lock him out. As the rover plowed onto the overgrown road, the gate clanged shut behind him and he realized that they might change the code while he was in the park. Barry might not come back alive from this hunt, but if he did he would have to leave the rover here and walk all the way back to camp. He got out of the rover and stuck the card into the slot again, jamming it in with a broken branch to keep the gate open. A guard might come along and pry the card free, but there was nothing more he could do.

He drove for a time, occasionally finding pugmarks in patches of mud; the tigers had stayed with the road for easier travel. The road wound down into a valley and turned impassable where a swollen stream had flooded it for twenty meters. Barry left the rover, shouldered his pack and rifle, and waded thigh-deep through the muddy, swirling water. The forest was overflowing from the rains, water falling in a thin cascade down the road on the other side of the steep valley, the leaves of the nearby trees swaying from the spray striking them. The tigers had left the

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road here, and he could find no tracks on the moss-carpeted ground. The forest was open and a slight breeze, barely perceptible, angled downhill. He recalled an old tactic of Corbett's; because tigers preferred to hunt into the wind, Corbett would attempt to confound any stalk by zigzagging back and forth. So Barry changed directions frequently as he climbed into the forest.

Near the crest of the hill, the structure of an ancient mosque took shape through the leaves and trunks of the trees, its weathered domed roof looking like the back of a decaying green elephant. Branches of the surrounding dhok and banyan trees had grown thickly around it, and vines had crept all the way up the column on the left. Leaves and dead branches littered the cracked stone steps leading up to a darkened entryway between two heavy, squared columns. The breeze rustled the thick banyan leaves, then all was still. He could smell the damp and mossy stone. An alarm barked suddenly overhead, and Barry whirled to catch a glimpse of a silver gray langur monkey scurrying higher into a tree.

When he looked back Shaitan was sitting in the mosque entry, immobile as if she were carved from stone too, regarding him with that same minimal concern with which she had urinated on him that night in camp.

Barry swung the rifle from its pack mount and rushed forward to get past a bush that partially blocked his view. He failed to lift his feet high enough on the slope and a root caught his boot, sending him sprawling, his rifle barrel plowing into the dirt. He heard the bush shake and felt a large body pass overhead, brushing his back.

On his left the cub was crouching, recovering from her leap and turning toward him. He jumped up and pointed the rifle to just below her snarling teeth. She was less than two meters away, but he dared not shoot because he didn't know how much dirt the barrel might have picked up.

Barry extended his arm, holding the rifle out at full length, one-handed, to keep it as far away from his face as possible in case she charged and he had to chance a shot anyway. As the cat's eyes burned into his own, Barry recalled that Corbett had once had to kill a crouching tiger at similar range, and in this exact position, while holding a pair of small bird eggs in his left hand. Give me the eggs, and a clean barrel, he prayed.

Shaitan growled sharply and the cub bounded away in a swirl of leaves. Barry looked around in time to see Shaitan turn almost lazily and disappear into the ancient ruin.

Ambush. She'd tried to lead him right past her cub, showing herself as the bait. But she couldn't have known his rifle was useless, and it must have looked as if he was about to shoot the cub. Barry froze, let his ears reach out far from his body, and caught the faintest scrap of a padded foot on stone. He waited, rejecting any notion of following them into that

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dark ruin. After a time he realized the cats would not show themselves again. He now stood alone, save for the monkey huddled in the tree.

Barry confirmed the cats' departure by finding their tracks on the other side, then camped that night in the ancient mosque, while the storm raged through the branches of the surrounding trees and water poured in rivulets down the stone walls. The interior was littered with dead vegetation and the dung of animals. After beating the ground thoroughly to drive away any snakes, Barry swept clear a relatively dry corner and spread out his sleeping bag and pad on the hard stone floor. The storm fluctuated but endured throughout the following day, and he waited it out, knowing the trail had long since been erased. Occasionally he would stretch his legs, going to the front or rear entrance of the mosque to watch the huge trees sway and crash and the play of lightning in the sky.

The thirst came upon him hard that second afternoon; his stomach cramped, sweat oozed on his skin, his hands trembled. But he had left all of the whiskey behind in camp, deliberately, and now there was nothing to give in to. He could endure worse. When he returned—if he returned—he would smash every bottle. It was the drink that had gotten Joshua killed. Barry had always been a light sleeper, and if he'd been in his tent instead of drunk on his ass he might have shot the tigress as she tried to leave with his old friend.

God, how he wanted a drink.

He closed his eyes and leaned against the cool, mossy stone. A trickle of water ran down through the moss against his cheek, and he turned his head to accumulate a swallow. The water was tepid, tasting slightly mineral from the old stone walls and a little dank from the moss.

His drinking had killed Ben, too. If he hadn't been up late with the guide and other tourists that night, hadn't slept in with a hangover the next morning, his son wouldn't have had to go to the latrine by himself. He had always known that, deep inside. Karen had known it too, but maybe she'd blamed herself even worse. Plenty of blame to go around, for the self, for the other, until nothing else remained. Neither ever saying anything or looking at the other; neither able to stand being around the other in that silence; until he found himself staying away more and more and she found herself in another man's bed. By the time she'd left him for that exchange college professor from the States, she must have been looking for anyone who would take her home. She never belonged in Africa, couldn't stand to stay in the place that had taken their son. While Barry couldn't bear to return to their old life without him.

Now Africa was his home, all he had left—even if it was hard to imagine continuing to hunt without Joshua and Robert. And going back to Zimbabwe, to face their families. . . .

He knew these sentient tigers had all the odds in their favor: he was

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alone, in their home territory, with little chance of catching them off guard. He stood an excellent chance of being killed, even more than in his early years as a professional hunter, when he'd taken all those ridiculous chances with wounded buffalo and leopards. And if he wasn't killed, the Indian government would either throw him in prison or deport him, once they caught up with him.

But nothing could be as bad as returning to face his trackers' families, while the tigress still lived. In truth, he wasn't hunting these cats for the Indians, not anymore. If they wanted to shelter man-eaters in their parks, that was their business. It might be nothing but retribution now, simple revenge, but it was also very African. The families would appreciate—expect—the death of the tigress Shaitan. Joshua's soul might rest then.

Even if not Barry's conscience.

The roar of an old two-stroke gasoline chainsaw awoke him early the next morning; it was followed by the crash of a tree in the valley below. Barry scrambled out of the bag, reaching for his trousers and boots. The park service was now so eager to catch him, they were cutting down their precious forest. Probably trying to build a ford for their rovers to cross the flooded stream.

The rain had stopped, he noticed, as he shouldered his pack and left the mosque. Wind still rattled the leaves and clouds hung low, threatening further downpour. Good—at least they wouldn't be flying yet, to locate him from the air.

He headed down into the next valley with little hope of finding a sign of the cats' recent passage. He might have to trust the cats to find him.

Then he would have to trust in blind luck.

By noon the sun was trying to come out and the forest steamed. Barry forced himself to go very slowly, both out of concern about the cats and to avoid overheating. His shirt was soaked and he had to pull on the canteen frequently. As he descended through the relatively open, old-growth forest of mixed coniferous and deciduous trees, he began to glimpse patches of bright green and the sparkle of water in a wide valley below. He checked his GPS coordinates on his watch; he was approaching Padam Taleo, the park's largest lake. By the time he reached the end of the forest the sun was nearing zenith behind a thin layer of low-hanging clouds, and the heat had grown intolerable. Further exertion risked heatstroke, and he knew the cats would be lying up too, probably in dense cover and near water.

The country around the lake was mostly low brush and open grassland, offering good visibility. When he came to the edge of the forest at the shore he could see Ranthanbhore fortress on the horizon at the far end of the lake, its ramparts and towers almost indistinguishable from the rocky hillside on which it had been built. The single approach, an old

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deteriorating road, angled up the steep face, switched back the other way, then angled up again, leveled off briefly, and passed through a pair of crumbling towers. Except for the road and a bald central peak, most of the fortress structures and supporting ramparts were overgrown with trees and bushes. Near the base of the hill, at the edge of the lake, stood what must have been the summer palace of some ancient king. The asphalt parking lot behind it, and the road running in along the other side of the lake, indicated that the palace must have been rebuilt and used as a visitors' center before the park was closed. Between Barry and the palace stretched a carpet of bright-green aquatic vegetation that made the water's surface in places look as firm as a soccer field.

He decided to wait out the worst of the afternoon within the edge of the trees, on a rise of ground where he could periodically glass the lake's western shore. Birds, some kind of flycatcher and what looked like an oriole, flitted among the lakeshore reeds and dipped hypnotically at the water's surface. He fell into a doze until late afternoon, when he awoke with a start at the banshee scream of a peacock somewhere uphill in the forest behind him.

He headed west along the lakeshore, toward the fort, following a dim game trail that took him stumbling across the roots of bushes and mucking through bogs and little creeks. His feet were soon soaked over the tops of his boots. Up ahead the brush gave way to grassland, and near the far end of the lake he saw a herd of sambar, the large Indian red deer, milling along the shore and wading hock-deep into the lake.

More sambar were coming out of the grass and entering the water. Their heads stood up, ears erect, all staring back at the shore as they splashed deeper into the lake. Through his binoculars, Barry caught a ripple of movement of the grass that was not the wind.

Barry couldn't see any tigers but thought they must be stalking the sambar. A spoiled stalk, since the sambar had detected them. Why didn't they break it off? Cats didn't usually waste time on alerted prey, especially in heat like this. Unless they were trying to herd the deer into the lake. What *for*—*to feed the crocodiles*?

But poachers were supposed to have wiped out the crocodiles, along with the park's other predators, years before. He hadn't seen any crocs as he'd traversed the lake shore, nor a single print or tail-drag in the mud at the water's edge.

A slight movement in the rushes along the far end of the lake, past the sambar—a parting of the stalks, then a V-wake swimming out on the lake surface. Then another V, parting the reeds slightly nearer the deer, whose attention remained fixed on the shore.

So the lake did still have crocodiles. Refocusing his binoculars, Barry could make out the black snout at the head of one wake and the slight surge thrown up by a large body swimming under the water. The two

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wakes swung around, honing in toward the sambar that were deepest in the lake. As they drew near, the snouts submerged entirely, leaving only a slight roiling of the surface and swaying of water plants as they covered the last few meters toward the unsuspecting deer.

Barry expected to see the water erupt as the crocodiles seized a deer in their jaws and the deer struggled to escape. Instead, the lake surface exploded orange fur and two sambar disappeared. Two tigers perched high in the water, their forepaws gripping the backs of the deer's necks.

Barry nearly dropped the binoculars. Cats swimming *underwater?*

This was how the two guards had been killed in the blind, why they hadn't seen Shaitan coming across the river.

The tigers were holding the sambar underwater, to drown them. The other deer panicked, scrambling, leaping at each other's backs, finally finding firmer footing in the shallows and bolting along the lake shore and then up into the forest. When the two deer were dead, the tigers dragged them out of the water and shook themselves. One looked like Shaitan. The other was even larger, with a more massive torso and a distinctive ruff—a mature male, probably the dominant one in this section of the park. Two other tigers moved out of the grass toward the kills.

Barry had failed to notice the steadily increasing sound of rotors thumping the air, but he couldn't miss the turbine scream as a park helicopter shot directly overhead. They must have been airborne as soon as weather permitted, and even though he'd turned off the satellite locator on his watch, he was standing in the open so they'd surely seen him. Too late though. He still had time to make a stalk and, with luck, get a shot off at the tigress before they could land and catch up with him. He probably would get no chance at the other man-eater, Shaitan's female cub, because the other cats would all scatter as soon as the tigress was hit.

The helicopter swung around to the north, and as his eyes followed it Barry caught a glimpse of movement on the road across the lake. A rover had just emerged from the forest, heading toward the fortress.

Lord, they were really after him, ground and air. He went back into the cover of the brush, moving alertly but without excessive caution because of the distance to the tigers and a favorable crosswind. The temperature had dropped slightly, along with the sun, and the brush here was relatively open, allowing him to make good time. The helicopter still thumped distantly from the direction of the rover across the lake. He had lost sight of the tigers, but believed they'd remain on the kill unless disturbed. The world was so full of the noise of aircraft and other human machinery that the helicopter probably wouldn't alarm them unless it flew directly overhead.

As Barry closed the distance he began angling back toward the edge of the grassland. The helicopter was coming back, searching for him. He'd hoped they wouldn't spot him in the brush, but the sound grew louder

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and louder. Barry didn't slow down until he reached the edge of the brush; the cats wouldn't hear him over the roar of the helicopter. He could see them now, alert but feeding on the sambar, at about four hundred meters. His scope could peg the exact range, but he wouldn't normally chance a shot at dangerous game at half that distance; the bullet would lose so much energy that he couldn't be sure of a quick kill.

But these weren't normal circumstances—not with the authorities about to pluck him out of here. If he could get a clear shot at Shaitan at a bit closer range, he'd take it. It might take her a while to die, but the park guards could end her misery if they wouldn't let him do it. A bullet in her vitals, and she was one finished man-eater. If he could get a second round into the cub, all the better.

The four tigers had stopped feeding and were looking at the helicopter. *Don't spook,* he prayed, easing to all fours and starting into the grass. He covered a short piece of ground, slowly, careful not to make the grass move, with that damned helicopter thumping overhead and the flies biting him unmercifully. When he came to the concealment of a bush, he raised his head and saw the cats had spooked, were trotting in a loose group around the far end of the lake, hopelessly out of range. Of course—Shaitan and the cub had learned to avoid helicopters during their spree outside the park.

Damn. He stood up to watch them go. The helicopter was setting down just ahead of him. That was that, then. Too damned hot to try to run away or chase the cats. After a blown stalk this time of day, he'd normally head back to camp for a drink. Maybe he shouldn't smash up all the whiskey.

Emily jumped out of the helicopter, ducking her head beneath the still-spinning rotors, and ran toward him. She was alone.

"It's those poachers!" she yelled, and pointed across the lake to the rover, which had parked behind a stand of low trees, out of sight of the cats. Through his binoculars he could see one of the poachers, probably the Chinese, standing on the rover's hood to watch the cats with glasses of his own.

"You're the one who spooked the cats toward them," Barry said. For indeed, the tigers seemed to be headed directly toward the concealed rover.

"You have to help me stop them! They'll kill them all!"

"And I'll kill Shaitan, if I get a chance," he told her. He saw her indecision, the paucity of choices she had. The poachers would kill every one of the cats if they could.

"You won't try to kill them all?"

"I'm only concerned with the man-eaters. Shaitan and her cub."

"Come on then." She started toward the helicopter, and he followed. "I won't let you kill them, you know, if I can stop you," she added, over her shoulder.

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Then they were in the seats, Barry placing the rifle behind him and fumbling for the straps. "I didn't know you could fly one of these."

"It's one of the military models with a smart auto-pilot. You use the cursor to tell it where to go, and it flies itself. That stupid bureaucrat was so busy trying to save face with reporters that I wasn't going to wait for him to decide what to do about you. So I appropriated his chopper. I just wish I knew how to fire the guns."

As the engines throttled up, he could see they were going to be too late; the tigers were already coming within range of the poachers, Shaitan and the large male bringing up the rear. He realized it was his fault the poachers were here at all, both for showing them that the tigers could be killed like normal animals and for jamming the park gate open. They must have tailed him when he'd left camp, and only been delayed by the flooding and the big storm. But maybe they'd kill Shaitan and save him the trouble.

The helicopter was lifting across the lake, and the cats had their attention on it, when the rover backed out of the stand of bushes at close range. The poachers began firing out of the left-hand windows, but they were over-eager, evidently not waiting for their smart-rifles to lock on, which could take a second or so on a moving target. The ground exploded in half a dozen places, showering clods of dirt and grass. Two of the cats instantly doubled back, heading across the road and toward the trees at the base of the fortress.

But the cub still hadn't seen the poachers; she veered directly toward the rover. To Barry it looked as if she thought the shots were coming from the helicopter, which he knew was moving fast but simply seemed to be hanging now over the water. The cub took a few extended bounds in which she too seemed to hang in the air, cutting the range even more; the poachers ceased their indiscriminate fire and waited for their rifles to lock; then a striped figure materialized out of the grass and bowled over the cub.

Shaitan. She seemed to snarl something while she kept the younger tiger pinned for an instant, then stepped back to let the cub spring to her feet. The cub took a bound toward the forest.

And then the right side of Shaitan's face exploded, leaving an afterimage of a pink mist dispersing in the air. The tigress staggered, swung her head, as if looking for the missing fragments of her face with her remaining eye. Two of the poachers leaped out of the rover and started toward her.

"Oh, God, no!" Emily moaned. She unhooked the microphone and switched on a loudspeaker. He could hear her voice reverberating through the four-seat cabin, over the thumping of the rotors.

"This is park enforcement"—well, she had their helicopter at least—"Cease firing and drop your weapons!"

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The poachers' only response was to turn their rifles from the wounded tigress to the helicopter. Barry saw jagged spots of daylight appear in the metal at the bottom of Emily's door and heard the clang of shrapnel piercing the hull and a slight "oh!" escape her lips. Then he was clutching wildly for support and trying to hold down the contents of his stomach as the automatic evasion program kicked the chopper into a hard bank. The lake surface rushed at his face through the side window, the helicopter righted itself, then banked the other way, and his equilibrium returned as they entered a steep climb up the fortress escarpment. At the top, Emily had it land on the road just outside the fortress gate, where they still had a view of the lakeshore. The engines shut down, and the only sound was the thump of the main rotors dying into a whooshing of the air around them.

"Did they hit an engine?" he asked.

"No."

He fumbled the caps off his binoculars and peered through the front window. The rover was still parked in the same position, and the two men on foot were in the grass. He couldn't locate a single tiger, but even from that distance he could see a bright, glistening swath of blood in the flattened grass in front of the two men. Shaitan had run off, despite her horrible wound, and the poachers were tracking her down. Going too fast, for trailing a wounded cat.

"What's happening? Do you see her?" There seemed to be a slight gasp in Emily's voice.

"No," he said. "Are you okay?"

She took her left hand away from her side. It was bloody.

"Oh. I guess not."

He got out, walked around the front of the helicopter, and opened her door. The wound was so small it took a moment to find it—a jagged hole on her left side, halfway down, that bubbled when she took a breath.

"We've got to get you to a hospital."

She was shaking her head.

"It's a lung hit, Emily. How bad, I don't know. But if we don't get you to a doctor, you could be dead within an hour." Within minutes, actually, though he didn't say it. Just because there was a tiny entrance wound didn't mean she wasn't badly torn up inside.

"And who's going to stop *them*?" she pointed at the poachers, still advancing across the field of grass. "They'll kill Shaitan. And Chowgarth." He assumed that was the cub's name, probably called after another famous man-eater. "And the others, if they find them. We can't let that happen!"

"Didn't you see what happened to Shaitan? Killing's the best thing for her now, if she's not lying dead down there already. Otherwise, she'll be in agony, maybe for days, before she dies."

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"Save Chowgarth then." Her voice had already grown noticeably weaker. "And don't tell anyone about the bioenhancement—you're the only one who knows, outside the program. If you say anything, the government might destroy her, and the rest of the wild tigers. Please."

"Can you keep holding your hand tightly here?" She nodded. He had already made up his mind. Given a choice, he would side with his own species. Just like the tigers would do. Or the sambar, or the banyan trees, if they could choose. This helicopter was going to the Jaipur hospital. Then, if the authorities would let him, he'd come back and help track down the poachers. And recover, or finish, whatever was left of Shaitan.

He was strapped in his seat, trying to start the engines and work the cursor, when something drew his attention back to the valley. He raised the binoculars and caught a twitch of movement in the foreground of the two poachers' advance.

The tigers erupted out of the grass with the same relentless force as they had attacked the sambar in the lake. There could be no defense; the two men barely had time to turn their heads in opposite directions. From one side, Shaitan leaped to seize the nearest man's head between her jaws, her head and forequarters blurring, tail erect and straight behind as a counterbalance, hind feet fixed and planted as if drawing their substance and power from the earth itself. Barry could almost feel the canines crunch through bone. The male tiger seized the other man by the shoulder and shook him as a housecat might shake a bird or rat, to break its back, then kept shaking him, growling so deeply and loudly that it carried clearly over the distance.

Shaitan had immediately dropped her own victim and was swinging her head back and forth, low over the ground, as if still looking for the rest of her face. She uttered a low moan, just as terrible as the male cat's growling. Then, with a few quick bounds, the two tigers disappeared again into the short grass. The male had taken his own kill with him.

Silence settled over the lake valley, and there was no movement, not even from the wind, except a slight quivering in the limbs of Shaitan's victim. The sky brightened briefly as the sun passed through a gap in the clouds building on the far horizon across the lake. Overhead a flight of birds headed to roost in the forest, wings whistling in the air.

The rover purred into motion as the remaining two poachers recovered from their shock. They didn't want to give up on the wounded tiger, but Barry doubted they would be leaving the protection of their vehicle. They drove toward the fort, traversing the grasslands and passing out of sight below the base of the rampart. Barry glanced at Emily; she had her free hand clenched tightly over the starter switch.

"We're not leaving while the tigers are in danger," she gasped.

It would be quicker to take a look than to argue with her. He left the helicopter and walked to the battlement edge. He could hear the rover on

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the road but couldn't see it behind the trees at the base of the fortress mount.

Barry caught a flicker of movement below. The ancient battlement wall had been built of rocks and boulders of various sizes and shapes, leaving cracks and protruding edges. Shaitan and her cub were climbing it, coming over the top of the first road switchback, perhaps heading for the shelter of the fortress ruins. The poachers must have seen them too, for Barry heard the rover switch gears and its engine toiling upslope, then saw it emerge from the trees on the road below.

The tigress stopped in the middle of the switchback just below Barry's position, swinging her head, still uttering that awful moan. The cub glanced at the approaching rover, looked back at her mother, and emitted a sharp snarl. If Shaitan heard, or saw the rover, she gave no sign, but walked around in diminishing circles in the road, finally lying down. Her moans dropped in volume and she laid her head on the road. The cub faced the rover, crouched, and began emitting ferocious warning growls of her own.

If Shaitan's sacrificing herself for a near-adult cub had surprised him, Barry was amazed any cat would do the same for a parent. Yet, this young tigress was preparing to fight the approaching vehicle by herself.

Barry ran back to the helicopter. Emily's head drooped on her chest, her eyes closed; her ragged shallow breathing caused blood to bubble out of her nose and mouth. It was too late, he realized. She wouldn't make it to the hospital.

She heard him at the door and lifted her head, and when he saw her eyes he realized that it was only her force of will that had kept her alive this long. She looked at him and knew her cats were not safe, and fumbled weakly to cover the starter, her eyes pleading with him.

Even as he took his rifle from the rear seat he still didn't know what or whom he might shoot. Somehow, she knew that too.

"Please," she said. "Not the cub."

He looked down, unable to make that promise. She coughed; bright red pooled behind her lips.

"You know, I was thinking," she whispered, red bubbles coming with the words. "Fossey did more for the gorillas after the poachers killed her, I think."

Whatever he was going to do, he'd better hurry. Barry ran back to the top edge of the wall. The rover had come within range of the two tigers and was maneuvering back and forth across the narrow road to give the man on the passenger's side a shot. The front wheels went to the very edge of the slope, the brake lights on. A smart-rifle's fat tube started to poke out the window toward the cats; then one of the poachers noticed Barry, and the barrel swung up.

He threw himself flat on the rock and heard the bullet explode just

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about where his head had been. Shrapnel pinged off the rocks, one piece stinging his arm.

That settled his priorities at least. He chambered a round, eased the rifle over the edge, found a good rest with both elbows braced on the rock, and located the rover's window in his scope. The smart-rifle was pointing again toward the tigers, but Barry couldn't tell the shooter's location within the vehicle, whether he was in the front or the rear seat. But he thought he could visualize the driver, just as his mind could always see an outline of an animal's heart and lungs inside its body. Holding low because of the steep angle, he squeezed off the Sako.

The three-hundred-grain bullet punched through the rover's roof with a sharp clang that came right after the rifle's boom. For a long moment, nothing happened. Then the barrel in the window jerked frantically, the brake lights went off, wheels crunched gravel as the rover lurched forward in gear.

Right over the edge of the steep slope and out of view. Barry heard the vehicle's suspension rattling and jarring, brush scratching metal, rocks crashing free from the battlement wall. Another instant of silence, and a heavy metallic crunch as it hit the ground below.

The cub watched the empty edge of the road, tail lashing the air, plainly suspicious of the rover's disappearance but still unaware of Barry's presence. The sound of the shot must have echoed off the wall, making its point of origin hard to fix. Barry swung the rifle to Shaitan and fired again; she jerked, flopped on her side, hind legs extended and quivering.

The cub looked back at her mother, trotted over, sniffed, let out a long wail. She still hadn't discovered Barry, seemed to believe that the rover had killed her mother. He settled the cross-hairs on point that would send the next bullet through the young tigress's front shoulder.

From the base of the fort below sounded a single querying growl. The young tigress trotted to the edge of the road, where the rover's wheels still marked the dust, and responded, her growl breaking into a wail. With his free left eye, Barry caught a flash of striped fur crossing a bare patch of the road down by the lake, through a gap in the trees. His cross-hairs remained fixed on the young cat's shoulder. A hard bitter taste had settled in his mouth, as if he'd just smoked a cheap, dried-out cigar clear to the nub.

An adult cub wasn't supposed to care about her mother. Cats didn't know parent-child love, or self-sacrifice either. Or revenge. But these weren't real tigers. And this one in his sights possessed two bits of knowledge that made her very dangerous—that humans could be prey, and how to be free of the park boundaries.

Barry would not have believed anyone could have survived the fall in the vehicle, but the very human scream that echoed up the wall told him it was so. The scream cut off in a series of angry growls. The young ti-

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gress was poised on the edge, to join the other tigers feeding below, but she turned to take one last look at her mother. Recognizing her death? And trying to deal with it?

She was crouching now to spring down the wall. Barry corrected his aim, and fired one last shot.

He wasn't sure if they were freaks. Maybe evolution *would* have done the same thing for the tiger, given enough time. And humans had manipulated animal genetics, by the more time-consuming and haphazard means of selective breeding at least, since the Paleolithic. Tigers probably weren't the only bioenhanced species let free on the planet even now. Maybe the ones we change will be the only animals left sharing the earth with us.

Or end up owning it themselves.

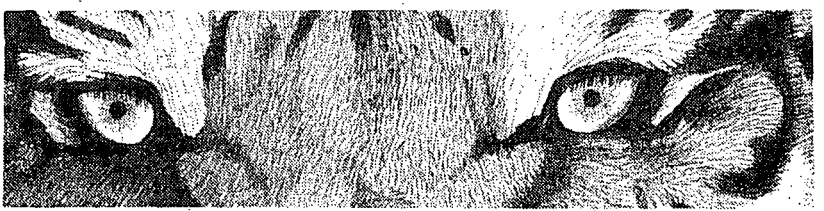
Barry knew only that it wasn't up to him to decide. He'd had enough, seen and done enough death and killing. Hunting would never be the same without Joshua, and he would never kill another cat after Shaitan. The sun was dying in blood past the forested hills beyond the lake, where the thick dark clouds massed for the night's storm, and he took the rifle by the barrel and winged it as far as he could, turning back toward the helicopter without waiting to see where it hit.

Her hand still clutched the control, but her chest had ceased its ragged rise and fall. Emily's eyes remained fixed toward his door. He hadn't come back in time to answer her look, but he set the coordinates for Jaipur and the helicopter rose from the ground. She'd been right about one thing: when word got out that Emily Kammath had been killed trying to stop poachers, there would be a worldwide wave of sentiment for her tigers.

He'd had a question he wanted to ask her. What do you think, Emily, he had wanted to say—would a smart young tigress, who had seen her brother and mother killed by humans and just had her own tail burned by a bullet, stay scared enough to remain home? Would that be enough, for a while anyway?

Maybe.

Or maybe not. ●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Time for an update on upcoming World SF Con(vention)s. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 13107B Autumn Wood Way, Fairfax VA 22033. The hot line is (703) 449-1276. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard. — Erwin S. Strauss

MARCH 1997

28-30—**BaltiCon.** For info, write: **Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203.** Or phone: **(410) 563-2737** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Baltimore MD (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Omni Hotel. Guests will include: Glen Cook, Frank Kelly Freas, Laura Brodian Kelly Freas, Mike Stein, Samanda Jeude, Don Cook.

28-30—**NorwesCon. (206) 270-7850.** SeaTac Red Lion, Seattle WA. V. Di Fate, Dr. R. L. Forward, G. J. Hedden.

28-30—**Magnum Opus Con. (706) 769-7502.** Radisson Hotel, Atlanta GA.

28-31—**UK Nat'l. Con.** Britannia Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool, England. B. Aldiss, J. Bing, O. Butler, D. Langford.

28-31—**New Zealand Nat'l. Con.** Airport Hotel, Wellington, NZ. Cadigan, John-Jules, R. Llewellyn, D. McCarthy.

APRIL 1997

4-6—**I-Con. (516) 632-6045.** State University of New York, Stony Brook NY. "East Coast's Largest SF Con."

4-6—**BabelCon. (412) 653-3589. (AOL) ncc1901.** New Kensington (PA) Inn. Marc Okrand. Media emphasis.

4-6—**Name That Con, Box 575, St. Charles MO 63302. (314) 583-5193.** Harley, Earth City MO. Hamilton, Tucker.

4-6—**NeoCon. (316) 684-6558.** Wichita KS. Joe Lansdale. Dates not set at press; sometime in April.

5-6—***Maritime SF Festival. (800) 622-6199.*** *Ramada, Dartmouth (Halifax) NS. Picardo, Fontana, Hull. Media.*

11-13—**ConTraption, Box 214055, Auburn Hills MI 48321.** Northfield Hilton, Troy MI. William Tenn, Nancy Janda.

11-13—**StarFest, Box 24590, Denver CO 80224. (800) 733-8735 or (303) 671-8735.** A commercial Star Trek event.

11-13—**SwanCon, Box G-429, Perth WA 6948, Australia. (09) 361-8210.** West Australia's traditional annual con.

11-13—**FILKONtario, 302 College Ave. W. #20, Guelph ON N1G 4T6. (905) 574-6212.** T. Kimberley. SF folksinging.

18-20—**AmigoCon, Box 3177, El Paso TX 79923. (800) 585-8574.** Quality Inn, I-10 @ Geronimo. Simon Hawke.

18-20—**NebulaCon, % Stokes, 2213 E. Cedar St., Olathe KS 66062.** Crown Plaza, Kansas City MO. Nebula awards.

AUGUST 1997

28-Sep. 1—**LoneStarCon 2, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. (512) 472-9944.** San Antonio TX. Budrys. WorldCon '97.

AUGUST 1998

5-9—**BucConeer, Box 314, Annapolis Junction MD 20701.** Baltimore MD. Cherryh. WorldCon 1998. $110 in 1997.

SEPTEMBER 1999

2-6—**AussieCon 3, Box 266, Prospect Heights IL 60070.** Melbourne, Australia. G. Turner, Benford. WorldCon '99.

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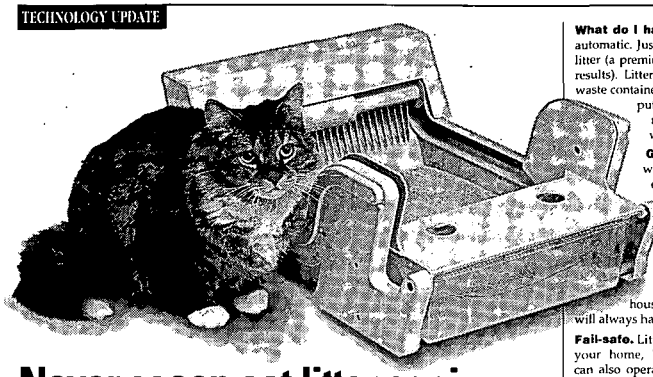

Never scoop cat litter again... Computer technology creates the only self-cleaning litter box!

You and your cat will love the way LitterMaid eliminates the hassle, mess and odor of the ordinary litter box.

by Shirley Liberles

Computer technology revolutionizes the litter box...

LitterMaid, a patented product from Waters Research Company, is a completely self-cleaning litter box operated by a microprocessor, but your cat uses it just like a normal litter box. Approximately 10 minutes after LitterMaid's "electric eye" senses that your cat has exited the litter box, it signals the start-up of the automatic sifting comb. ★ The comb sifts through the litter, scooping up any waste. ★★ The waste is deposited into a sealed, air-tight waste container and the comb returns to its original position, smoothing the litter. The system resets, ready to repeat its cycle the next time your cat uses the litter box. ★★★ When the waste container is full, you can either throw it away and put a new one in its place or empty it and reuse it for up to one year!

House cats. Large or small, affectionate or independent, young or old, long-haired or short, they all create the same dilemma for their owners—the litter box.

There are few things I can think of that are as foul as cleaning the litter box at my house. Even when I clean it daily, it's difficult to keep odor away.

And this problem is multiplied because I have two cats! But because I love them, and that's virtually all the maintenance they require, I do it...because there's no other option.

Well, today there's a solution that cat owners across the country will be thrilled about. LitterMaid, manufactured by Waters Research, is destined to make ordinary litter boxes obsolete!

Automatic cleaning. LitterMaid is a computerized, completely self-cleaning litter box. Its operation is controlled by a microprocessor. An electric eye senses when the cat has exited the litter box, and minutes later, it signals the start-up of the automatic sifting comb. The comb sifts through the litter, scoops up any waste, and deposits it into a sealed, air-tight disposable waste container. The comb then returns to its original position, smoothing the litter. LitterMaid is now ready to begin another cycle as soon as necessary.

Revolutionary. LitterMaid may permanently change the face of the cat-product industry. Cat owners will never again have to endure the unsanitary and odor-filled chore of cleaning their cat's litter box. Plus, there will be no more embarrassing litter-box odor in your home, because the disposable waste container is sealed and totally air-tight!

What do I have to do? LitterMaid is fully automatic. Just fill the pan with *clumping* cat litter (a premium brand will provide the best results). LitterMaid does the rest! When the waste container is full, just throw it away and put a new one in its place. You'll never have unsanitary contact with cat waste again!

Good for your cat. Not only will LitterMaid make *your* life easier, it will make the litter box a nicer place for your cat. Most cats dislike using litter boxes that are dirty, and that can lead to them not going to the bathroom. Or worse, they may choose to use the bathroom around the house! With LitterMaid, your cat will always have a healthy, clean litter box.

Fail-safe. LitterMaid plugs into any outlet in your home, but it can also operate on eight "D" batteries. So even in the event of a power failure, LitterMaid will continue cleaning. It is equipped with an alarm that alerts you when the batteries are running low.

LitterMaid eliminates...

- *Embarrassing litter-box odors*
- *Having to endure the unsanitary and odor-filled chore of cleaning your cat's litter box*
- *Limiting the areas within your home in which you can place the litter box*
- *Worrying about how to clean the litter box if you go on vacation*
- *Having a cat who refuses to use the litter box because it's dirty*
- *Some risk of catching a disease from the cat's waste—this is especially important for pregnant women and people with immune deficiencies*

Put it anywhere. LitterMaid is only a couple inches longer and taller than conventional cat litter boxes. It should fit easily where your litter box is now—and you should put it there at first, until your cat gets used to it. But later, because LitterMaid is odorless and sanitary, you have the opportunity to place it virtually anywhere in your home—without any ordinary litter-box worries!

Try it risk-free. LitterMaid is backed by our exclusive risk-free home trial. Try it, and if you're not completely satisfied, return it within 90 days for a full refund, "No Questions Asked." It's also backed by a one-year manufacturer's limited warranty.

LitterMaid System . . . . . $199 $16 S&H
Waste container refills (4) . . . . . $11 $4 S&H
Please mention promotional code **1233-10564**.

For fastest service, call toll-free 24 hours a day

800-992-2966

To order by mail, send check or money order for the total amount including S&H (VA residents add 4.5% sales tax). To charge it, enclose your account number and exp. date.

CONTRAD INDUSTRIES
2820 Waterford Lake Drive, Suite 106
Midlothian, Virginia 23113

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Fifteen years of microelectronic research makes conventional antennas a thing of the past!

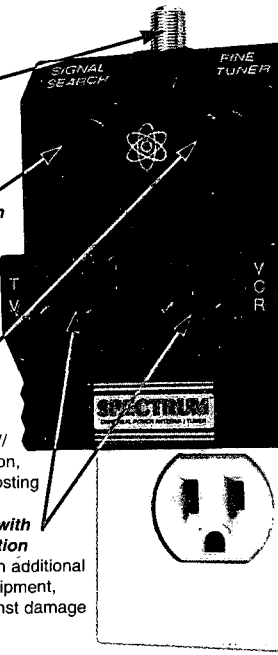
This little box uses your home's electrical wiring to give non-subscribers, cable subscribers and satellite users better TV reception on local broadcast networks!

Thanks to 15 years of microelectronics research, a new device has been developed that is so advanced, it actually makes conventional antennas a thing of the past. It's called the Spectrum Universal Antenna/Tuner.

Advanced technology. If you live in a rural area, you may have simply accepted the fact that your local TV reception is poor. This may be true even if you *don't* live in a rural area! Imagine watching TV and seeing a picture clearer than ever before. Plug your TV into the Spectrum Antenna and get ready for great reception—your TV will suddenly display a clearer, focused picture.

Uses your home's electrical wiring. The Spectrum Antenna plugs into a standard wall outlet. It turns the electrical wiring in your house or apartment into a multi-tunable TV antenna that will improve your TV's tuning capability.

Rural areas. Most TV signals in rural areas are weak, making them harder to fine tune. The "Gain Booster" is designed to increase the output level of the signal entering your TV, delivering a 10-fold greater signal. By using the Gain Booster, Spectrum's fine tuning controls will function better, giving it a stronger signal to tune. It also works in conjunction with your outdoor antenna!



Parallel 75 ohm resistance
For minimum loss of signal

Signal search control
For selecting multiple antenna configurations

Resonant fine tuner control
For dialing in crisp, clear TV/stereo reception, eliminates ghosting

Dual outlets with surge protection
For plugging in additional TV/stereo equipment, guarding against damage and surges

Try it risk-free. The Spectrum Antenna comes with our 90-day risk-free trial and a 90-day manufacturer's warranty. Try it yourself, and if you're not satisfied, return it for a "No Questions Asked" refund.

Spectrum Antenna ..... **$39** $4 S&H
Additional antennas ..... **$34** S&H free
Gain Booster ..... **$19** $2 S&H

Please mention promotional code **1495-10563.**

For fastest service, call toll-free 24 hours day

800-230-5023

comtradindustries
2820 Waterford Lake Drive, Suite 102 Midlothian, VA 23113

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